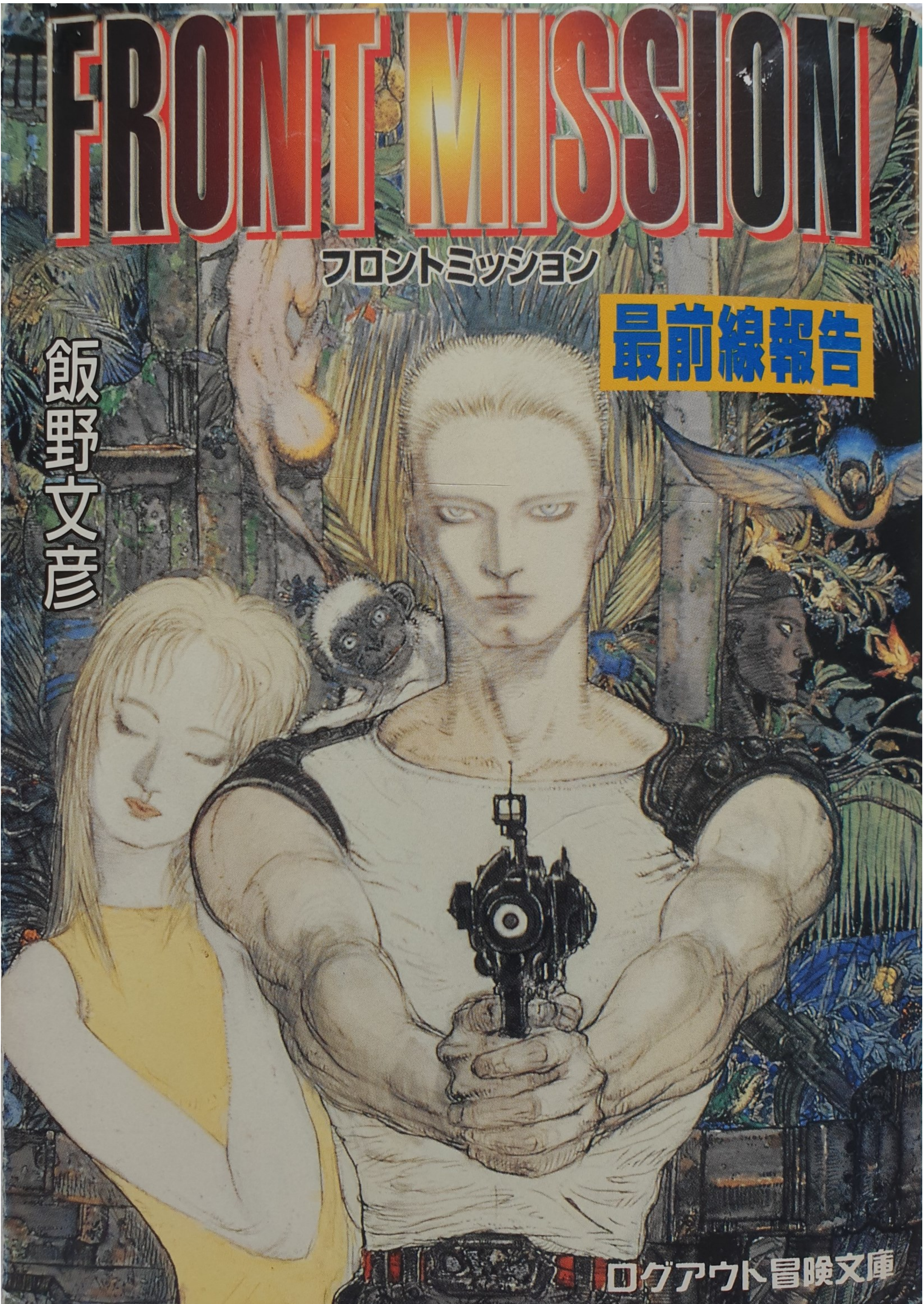

FRONT MISSION
フロントミッション
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飯野文彦
ログアウト冒険文庫

# Front Mission

## Frontline Report

By Fumihiko Iino
Hideo Iwasaki

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# Front Mission: Frontline Report





**World Chronology**

# The Global Situation in **2090**

AD

***1995:*** Emergence of Huffman Island

[Placed under UN administration following the discovery of a UN aircraft]

***2005*** Birth of the Euro Community

[EC Integration]

***2015:*** Birth of the Republic of Zaftora (formerly Russia)

2020: Birth of the United States of the New Continent (USN)

[Integration of North and South America] Withdrew from the UN the same year

***2021–*** Establishment of the Saftora Republic-UN Peacekeeping Organization - [UN Peacekeeping Forces (PMO)]

2025: Vandrung-Wagen (WAW)

First Prototype Born

2026: Birth of the Oceana Joint Union (OCU)

[Integration of Asia and Oceania]

**2070:** Outbreak of the First Huffman Conflict

[Between OCU and USN]

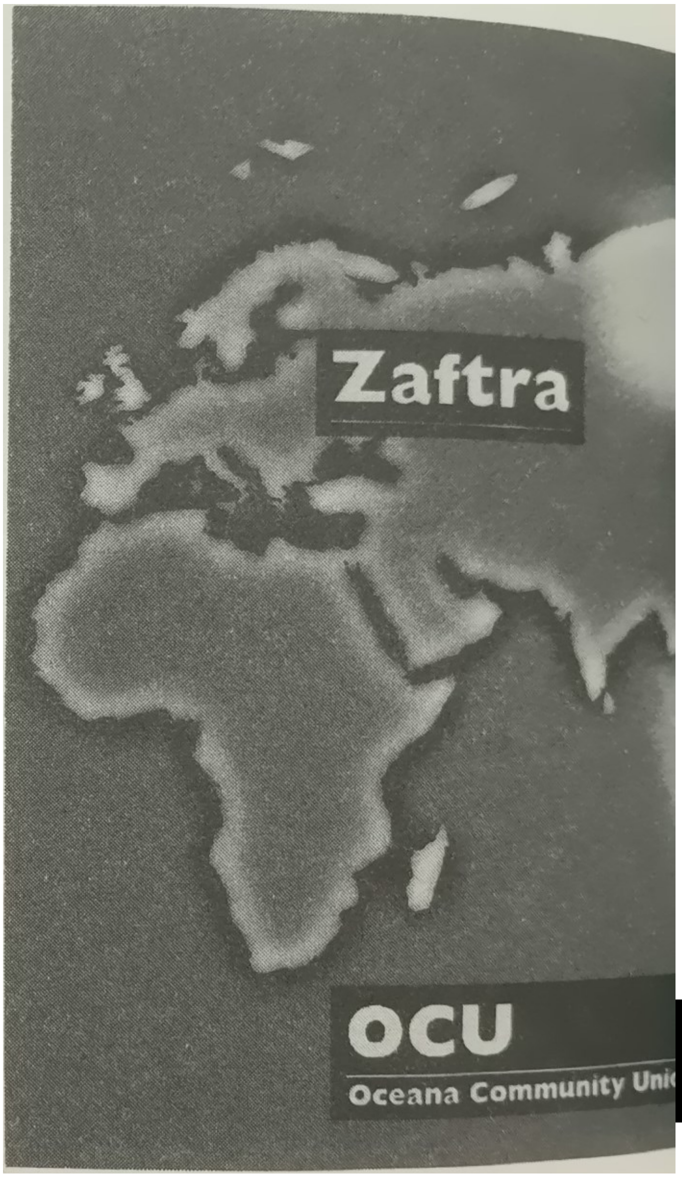
2071 Huffman Treaty Signed*

**2072**: Following the intervention of **PMO** under the command of Zaftora, the two and a half years

**2090:** The Larkas Incident · Outbreak of the Second Huffman Conflict

*Huffman Treaty: A treaty prohibiting the use of all weapons that pollute the environment, such as nuclear and chemical weapons, within Huffman Island.

The world map of 2090 was characterized by five communities: America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Russia. This was because, since the early 21st century, joint national plans aimed primarily at economic self-sufficiency, strengthening diplomatic power, improving production and manufacturing capabilities, and maintaining power had been promoted in each country.




## Ociana Joint Union [OCU]

Oceana Community Union

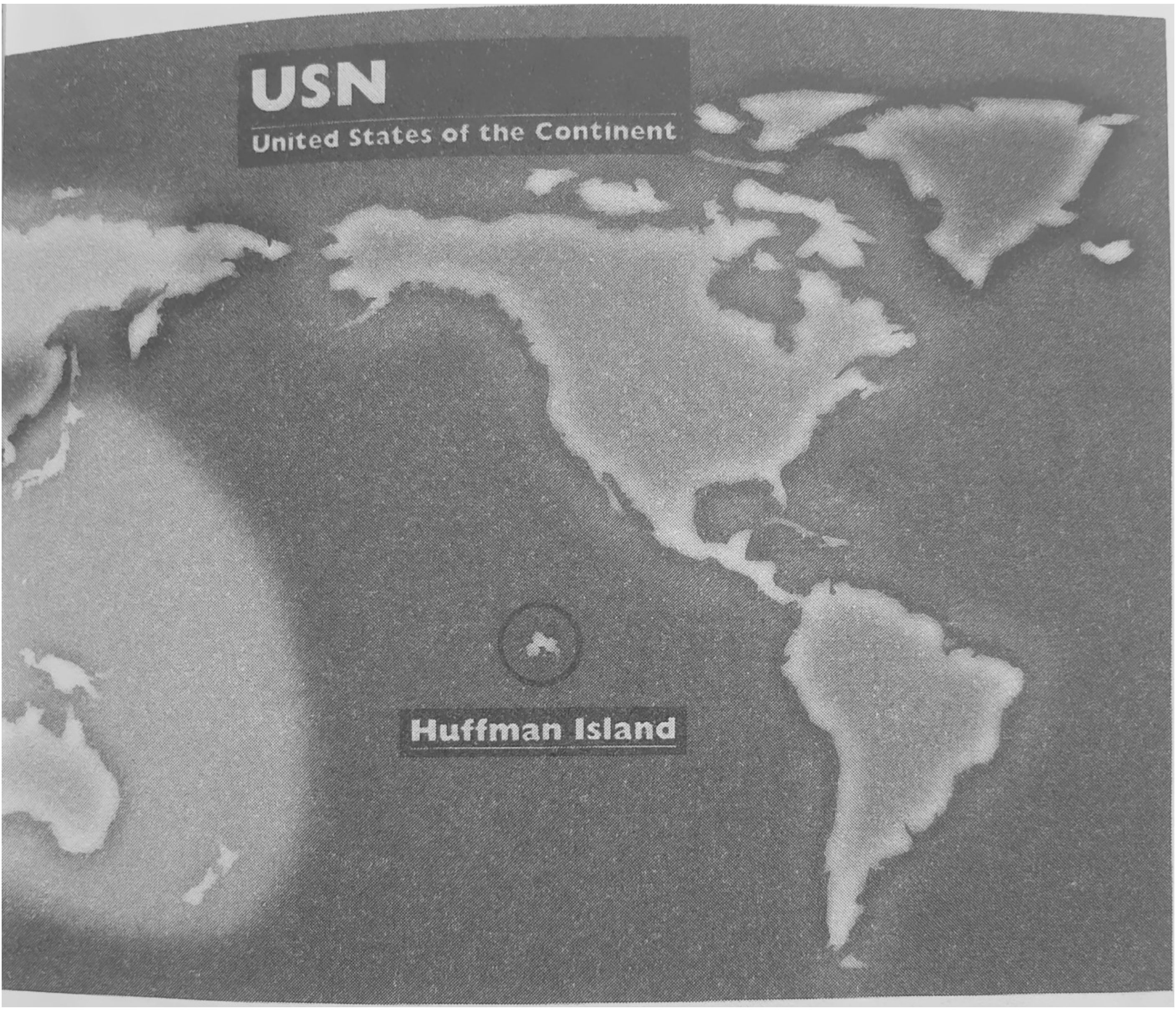
An economic union primarily aimed at achieving economic independence for Oceania and Asia. Recognizing that resources and diplomatic negotiating power were necessary to avoid becoming a mere economic appendage of the West, a plan for an economic community was devised that integrated Australia's resources with Japan's manufacturing technology.

However, the roots of ideological conflict ran deep, and it took 36 years to form the union.

## United States of the New Continent [USN]

United States of the New Continent

When the United States and Canada began moving toward political integration, the nations of North America proposed a merger. The two countries proceeded to restructure this as a new nation with sovereignty held by the United States and Canada. Then, six years before the formation of the OCU, the United States of the New Continent was proclaimed. With the exception of a few nations that asserted their independence, the North and South American continents were unified.




## Huffman

Huffman Island

2° N, 269° E; Area: 79.215 square kilometers 482,004 units, currency in circulation: Huffman $; U.S. production: Cattle: 872,000 head; Dairy cows: 335,000 head; Beef cattle: 216,300 head; Fish catch: 932,000 tons; Crude oil production , Natural gas production: 1.258203 billion cubic meters

A new island that emerged over a period of about 70 years. The northern side consists mostly of highlands, with a range of lower mountains led by Mount Wayne, which stands at 944 meters. In addition, rare seabirds have inhabited Long River Nisna on the southern side since the beginning of the uplift, and it has been designated as an international protected area by the International Peacekeeping Organization (PMO), with all habitation and combat activities strictly prohibited.

# Contents

# Prologue

In war, soldiers are nothing more than pawns.

It makes no difference whether it’ s a winning battle or a losing one. 2. If ordered by a superior, I’ ll press a gun to the back of the neck of even my own parents or siblings and pull the trigger.

■If ordered, I’ ll charge into a hundred enemy Vantours, even if I’ m alone. ヽ That’ s the job. It’ s a lousy job. 1 - ■

·But if you can’ t do that, you’ d be better off not joining the military. In this world, on the cusp of the 22nd century, most of humanity has grown complacent in peace. Only weirdos would willingly choose to get into a shootout. ;---*. : That said, I’ m glad I volunteered.” *.. ; ., ■Because you can kill people? Wrong.

It was a much, much more naive reason. Don’ t laugh—just listen. When I joined the military, what I got was the exact opposite of what I’ d imagined.

It was a girlfriend.

I know I sound like a love-struck fool.

Her name is Karen. Lieutenant Karen Muir, twenty-one years old. She’ s my subordinate. Don’ t get involved with your subordinates. I know that too. But I couldn’ t help it. We ended up falling in love with each other. When we first met, ■- At first, she was just a young girl with rosy cheeks. If I was a little strict with her, she’ d get tears in her eyes. “A young lady like this is useless.” That’ s what I thought within minutes of starting to drill her. So, I tried to snap her out of it quickly.

“Little miss, you’ re in the wrong place. Pack your bags right now and go back to your kind mom.”

I took special care of her :)=1M. She cried, didn't she? Tears like red beans just kept rolling down her cheeks. But... she just wouldn't quit.

There were nearly a hundred new recruits, men and women combined. Three months later, there were only five left. Corpses. She was among them.

She looked at me and saluted with a smile.

Her cheeks, glistening in the sun, weren’ t apple-red anymore. They were pale and dazzling. Seeing that smile, I fell in love at first sight.

It was love at first sight, three months after we met. It’ s a fact, so there’ s nothing I can do about it. Three months after that. ^^^^^

In short, we became that kind of couple. The so-called relationship between a man and a woman. Another three months later. Before we got into bed and did “that,” I proposed. She cried. ・・・

“You idiot. If you’ re going to say something like that, there’ s a proper place to do it, isn’ t there?” Sure enough, they were big, fat tears. ・ ・ ・ But to me, they didn’ t look like red beans; they shone like pearls. I got sulky. I’ d made up my mind and said those words. —,’.

So I told her.

“I don’ t care. You’ re the first person—the first Karen—who’ s made me feel like saying something like this.”

She said “Idiot…” again and shed tears.^^^ The sparkle in her tears had changed from pearls to diamonds.^^^ It wasn’ t just because of the tears. She herself had grown more

radiant.

That night. She snuggled up to me in bed, resting her face on my chest, and stayed still until morning. I stayed still, too.

Neither of us could say a word.

But it was a more wonderful night than any we had spent together before.

Come to think of it, this past year...

■Whenever I had a day off, I would visit her parents' house. ■¥：；^^^^^^^^ – Karen's mother welcomed me with a smile.

Her father was smiling, too. But whenever I tried to have a serious conversation, he would immediately offer me a drink, one after another, and wouldn't give me a chance to speak.

On the jet back to the base from her house, I'd always hear Karen yelling at me through my hangover-fogged head.

"Why don't you just marry Dad so the two of you can drink all night every night!"

So, three months ago. –

Before opening the gate to Karen's parents' house, I turned my back to her and downed the small bottle of whiskey I'd been hiding. – Then, bowing deeply before Karen's father, who was offering me a drink, I said, "Please let me marry Karen."

Her father drank his drink in silence.

・I kept my head bowed. ^^^^– After a while—I don't know if it was thirty minutes or an hour—I heard the sound of someone sniffling. When I looked up, Dad was crying. He was drinking

while he cried. Our eyes met.

Dad wiped his tears and forced a smile. He nodded once, but tears immediately welled up again, and his smile crumpled. Karen’ s tears were just as big as Dad’ s. That night, I didn’ t marry Dad, but just as Karen had said, the two of us drank the night away.  The next day, with a massive hangover, I boarded the jet. For the first time, Karen didn’ t yell at me. Far from yelling, she spoke to me gently.2:1·2;;-:shi’ ″I have psychic powers, you know.″ Ko: · - ″Psychic powers?″ ㄣ ″Well, it's not like I can use them anytime I want. Only when I say, 'This is it.' The first time was when I joined the military; I used it to convince Dad.″ -:·■—— : 1—二-';'■」'.· ″And the second time?″

“Yesterday.”

″So, does that mean Dad agreed yesterday because of that psychic power?″

Karen nodded with a smile.

Thinking I might as well have a drink to take the edge off, I casually pulled my right hand out from inside my jacket. I’ d better get rid of that small bottle of whiskey before anyone finds it.  “But come to think of it, that means I used it for Dad both times.” Karen laughed, amused.

Curious, I asked.

“What are you going to use it for next~·”

“For a special occasion. After all, I can only use my superpower three times.”

“Why~·”

“Why? I don’ t know myself… but I just have a feeling.” I gave a wry smile and closed my eyes.

Karen rested her head on my shoulder. After a moment, she

said quietly,

"I' ll save the third one for you. I' ll keep it safe for when you' re really in trouble "

"This is Rabbit 1. We' ve arrived at the reconnaissance point."

Karen' s voice over the radio snapped me back to reality.

Oh no. I' m on a mission.

I sat up straight inside the Van Tour.

My last mission with Karen. Once this mission is over, Karen will be discharged.

And in six months, Karen Muir will become Karen Clive.

By the way, Clive is my family name.

Our relationship as superior and subordinate ends with this mission. That must have left a gap in my judgment, clouded as I was by love.

Even though it' s just reconnaissance, letting my guard down like this—I have to admit, I' m a failure.

I cleared my throat, gathered my composure, and asked Karen.

"What's the situation?" -- ・-.ド'-;"

A tense voice came back. "It' s strange, it' s too quiet. …It feels like no one' s here." —ニ」 : .—^^^ . "Don' t let your guard down."

My voice was even more strained than hers. ;^^^^^^^^^L Perhaps sensing this, Karen softened her tone and said teasingly, "It' s fine. I have no intention of dying in a place like this, Captain!" I cleared my throat loudly, then

"We' re on duty, Lieutenant Karen,"

■ I shouted, putting on a brave front. ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^:.

“I know that. Rabbit 1, commencing reconnaissance.”

I looked at the radar. The light representing Karen’s Van Tour was moving deeper into the USN military munitions factory.

If I’d known it would come to this, I should have made Karen wait and gone on the reconnaissance mission myself.

■I regretted it. I—but Karen had volunteered for the reconnaissance mission herself. It’s just a simple reconnaissance mission. It shouldn’t be dangerous. Thinking that, I—the one in charge of this reconnaissance operation—was the one who accepted her offer. “Well, .1Yu. I can’t back out now because of my own personal motives.

All I can do is wait anxiously for Karen’s report.

The atmosphere inside the Van Tour felt oppressively heavy.

A silence so thick it was suffocating. As if sensing it,

“So, are you still worried about your fiancée?” Sakata’s voice came over the radio.

I responded, more dramatically than necessary,

“Chit-chat during an operation is grounds for execution,”

I snapped at him.

“Captain,”

Sakata said in a typical military tone. He might be saluting me from inside the Van Tour, about five meters away.

Hmph. Who am I to lecture my subordinates? I was wallowing in sentimental nonsense myself.

I changed my tone and said cheerfully,

“I’m hungry. In five minutes, call Lieutenant Karen back, and let’s head back to Pui’s place and grab a hamburger.”

Pwee was the driver of the supply truck that had brought the three of us to this area.

“I don’ t know about that. Puii’ s a glutton. He might have eaten our hamburgers too.”

Sakata seemed to have loosened up a bit, too.

“Knowing that glutton, it’ s entirely possible.”

"Did you know, Captain? Pee-wee ι even though he's so fat, he's actually a total coward. And apparently, when he's all alone and feeling lonely, he gets even hungrier."

"In that case, hamburgers are out of the question."

I gave a wry smile. Sakata laughed heartily for a moment, then asked, “But why on earth do we have to go so far as to violate the treaty just to scout out a factory like this∽·”
"

[Departed Menasa City, Oshiana Joint Federation Territory, Huffman Island, at night.

Traveled by small submarine to a point 30 kilometers off the coast of Fotominas City in USN territory, then transferred to a camouflaged vessel and landed.

Conduct a top-secret reconnaissance of the enemy factory located in the La|cas district of USN territory.

Note: In consideration of political tensions between the two nations, combat operations are strictly prohibited. These were the operational guidelines for this top-secret mission issued by the OCU military high command. —: I agreed with Sakata.

However, if the pawns defy the Master, the game of the military itself cannot function.

"I don't know. It's probably just some bureaucrats' idea. It's bound to be something useless," I replied to Sakata. In truth, I didn't know any more than that myself.

“T-this factory…” Suddenly, Karen’ s voice came over the radio. “What’ s wrong, Karen?” I leaned forward. But Karen, as if she couldn’ t hear my voice, said, “I-I can’ t believe it This can’ t be ,” she muttered, almost to herself. “Answer me. Karen, Karen H.” But the voice that came back was Sakata’ s. “Captain, enemy forces have appeared!” ◆ ,·’ - “What?!”

I looked at the radar .

Before I knew it, twenty—no, nearly thirty—lights had appeared around Karen. And they were slowly, steadily closing in on her.

“This is ridiculous. I can’ t believe the enemy was hiding over there…” Sakata muttered.

“I’ ll cover Karen’ s craft. Charge in!”

I shouted to Sakata.

“Roger!

I activated the Vantour and charged forward. -2『.♦.

Karen, Karen, I’ m coming to help you right away.

″T-Taka-i! Right in front of me ″J-Nii: :·Goヾ Ni; Ni Ni1 Sakata screamed. ; Suddenly, a giant Van Tour appeared right before our eyes. ’;A I reflexively shouted into the radio., 专;.1.” -*- · “Who the hell are you?!” , 1:-- 1厂 After a moment’ s pause… a truly eerie pause… “:ㅗ; 「;」.^ “Do OCU pilots ask every enemy for their name?”

came a mocking voice.

A chill ran down my spine.

There wasn’ t a shred of warmth in that voice.

It sounded as if a machine were speaking. Yet, it was unmistakably human. A voice concealing a coldness and cruelty surpassing that of any machine^^.″

The voice spoke quietly, as if freezing the air.

“In praise of your courage for arriving as scheduled, allow me to introduce myself. I am Driscoll. Captain of the New Continent United States.”

″Driscoll ″

“Let’ s see just how far an OCU pilot can go.”

Before his words had even finished, the missile launcher mounted on the shoulder of Driscoll’ s craft erupted in fire. The impact, the deafening roar, and the orange and yellow flames ::M The left arm of my Vantour had been obliterated in a single blow’■;

“Damn it!”

This mission is strictly reconnaissance. Prioritizing speed, I’ m not equipped with any proper weapons. I returned fire with the lightweight rifle mounted on my right arm, the “Winnie.” It’ s like facing a giant elephant with an air gun. It has almost no effect ˋ ·

“We’ re surrounded!”

—Karen’ s voice. A tense voice! A voice filled with anguish.

″Karen H″ I fired a burst at Winnie. ″Heh heh heh. Not bad for an OCU pilot. But the fun ends here—·ゝ

Driscoll muttered

“Karen. Get out of here fast! Sakata, head out to provide backup.”

“I can’ t. My leg’ s been blown off—I can’ t even move properly!”

″Damn it. Karen, I’ m coming!″

″No, don′t come over hereeeeeee!″

″Karen, Karen H!″

He screamed. ■ . ‘

There was no response from Karen.

Instead, Driscoll said with a dry laugh.

“That’ s enough. Let’ s get rid of the evidence.”

His voice carried a cruelty so innocent it was almost childlike, like a child crushing a bug out of curiosity. Driscoll’ s massive Vantour fired a beam of light. “’-( 二’ “Captain. Please withdraw —H” ・二(-；1 二爭； Finally, I heard Sakata’ s scream.

Enveloped by a vibration that shook the ground beneath my feet and searing flames, I lost consciousness. Karen, Karen, Karen, Karen, Karen .

# Chapter 1

The chirping of birds echoed from among the treetops.

Frederick, who had been sitting on a bench in the park, looked up. “A lark? A white-eye? Or just a sparrow ?” Frederic gave a wry smile.

At himself, unable to tell whether it was a sparrow or some other bird. OCU ı Oshiana Common Union—TOKYO · City. It was a bench in Arisugawa Park, located right in the center of it all. 2 “ “■ “’ ■” ■ The sun was high in the sky; it was a peaceful afternoon. 11¥ f He glanced at his wristwatch. There were still about ten minutes until the meeting time.

She might be late, but she never arrived early—not even by a minute, let alone a second. That was Sayuri’ s personality these days. I! · Frederic let out a sigh and rubbed his temple with his right hand.

As he let go of his temple, a look of exhaustion appeared on his face.

“When did our relationship become like this?”

Looking up at the sky with a distant gaze, Frederic thought to himself. It was only in the past year that she had visibly grown cold. But there had been signs even before that: / ■ノ I was just too swamped with work to notice.1；ニニ■.厂> ■ “Which is more important to you, me or your work?” “—ベ: 二 :· I never imagined I’ d hear such a cliché line come out of Sayuri’ s mouth. Suddenly, a Chinese proverb popped into Frederic’ s head: “温故知新” By studying the past, one gains insight into the future.

This saying applies to men and women, especially in marital relationships. Only now did he realize it.

Only now, when he was cornered to the point of no return. What a foolish man.

Unaware of the birdsong or his wife' s feelings, he had convinced himself he was a top-tier journalist and had been racing around the world.

I convinced myself I was talented and believed Sayuri was happy about it.

He holed up in Africa for over half a year and broke the story of collusion between high-ranking government officials and corporations.

The staff at the Tokyo Times headquarters welcomed Frederick back with open arms, treating him like a hero. But Sayuri felt differently.

With his heart light from the celebratory drinks at the office, Frederic hurried home to his beloved house. What greeted him was not a "Welcome home." It was an empty room and a divorce form sitting on the table. She had returned to her parents' home, taking their only daughter, Naomi, with her.

He called her parents' house. "..." Suri hung up after just two words. "..."

"There' s nothing to talk about."

"I' ll send someone reasonable over soon."

Her voice was as cold as ice.

Frederick grabbed a bottle of brandy from the shelf and took a swig.

Why? Why? Why?

His blood boiled with incomprehensible rage. Pini; 1-

It happened six months ago.

He hadn’ t signed the divorce papers yet.

As if to shake Sayuri from his mind, he pulled a letter from his suit’ s inner pocket.

Handwritten words were scrawled across the crumpled stationery.

The letter was from Park Il, a Korean man who joined the “Tokyo Times” at the same time as me. He was my rival. Or, to put it another way, my only close friend.

It had been nearly a month since the letter arrived. But two days before the letter arrived, Frederick had heard from his boss about Park’ s death.

″It seems he accidentally stepped on a landmine while on assignment,″ his boss said. ..-.:.. A letter from the dead. The last letter I received from Park . ■ After reading the letter, Frederick learned the true cause of Park’ s death. “ ” ■ Because the cause was written in the letter.,, Park had been stationed on Huffman Island as a war correspondent for the past six months. ‘ To cover the Second Huffman Conflict /n 1 There, as a newspaper reporter, he demonstrated top-notch instincts. ■ He had sniffed out a conspiracy unfolding in the shadows of this war. -; :A Frederic told no one about the letter’ s arrival or its contents.

Even if he had, it wouldn’ t have changed anything. He had no proof.

So Frederick decided to leave.

The voice of an innocent young girl.

When he looked up, Naomi was running toward him with a smile.

Frederick put away Park’ s letter and stood up.

He picked up his beloved daughter, who had run into his arms. ■ He closed his eyes and felt Naomi’ s weight against his skin.

Just as a sugar cube melts gently into hot water, his mind found peace.

It was a peace that only Naomi could give him.

“I’ ll be back  and a half.”

An emotionless voice shattered my peace.

The voice belonged to the person who, until just a moment ago, had been my other source of comfort. It was my wife, Suri.

“We agreed on an hour.”

“I have a piano lesson.”

“But we’ re leaving tomorrow. Who knows when we’ ll see each other again…” 2:.. “Frederick swallowed his words.

We might never see each other again.

He couldn’ t bring himself to say that in front of Naomi, even if his mouth were split open. Sayuri said, even more emotionally.

“That’ s just for your convenience, isn’ t it?”

■ “Mom

Naomi looked at Sayuri timidly.

Sayuri bit her lip.

She muttered, looking at Frederic.

“The lawyer told me not to let Naomi see you until the divorce is finalized, yet here we are ″

Her eyes trembled like ripples on water.

“I understand. Thirty minutes is fine.” ·Mi, Ni-su –’■· :
Frederic said.

Sayuri turned her back, as if to sever some connection.

She walked away if shaking something off.

Once they were alone, Naomi asked.

“Dad, starting tomorrow, we’ re going to Huffman Island, right?”

“Did you hear that from Mom?”

″Mm-hmm.″

″I see ″

Frederick set Naomi down and sat down next to her on the bench.

“It’ s right in the middle of the South Pacific, and it hasn’ t even been a hundred years since it was built, has it?”

“Did you hear that from Mom, too?”

I looked it up. “Oh, I see. That’ s impressive.”

Huffman Island first emerged from the sea in 1995.

In 2065, after seventy years, volcanic activity ceased, and the island took on its current form.

Since then, development has only just begun on this new island.

″It's about one-fifth the size of Japan, and it's shaped like a fermata, isn't it?″ ″A fermata?″

“I learned about it in piano lessons. It’ s a musical symbol that looks like this ″ Naomi hopped up from the bench.

She used a small twig lying on the ground to draw a diagram.

■” 匚 ; . ザ ; ;

A semicircle with the cut edge facing down, and a round dot underneath.

″Is this the symbol called a fermata?″

“That’ s right. When you see this mark, it means you have to hold that note longer,” Naomi said proudly.

“A fermata, huh. It does look similar. Dad and the others say Huffman Island looks like a bowl placed on top of a pea.”

“What—a bowl on a pea?” 1

Naomi burst out laughing. 122″

—. The semicircle of the fermata—or the bowl part—is Huffman Island ■Nizese

· Its official coordinates are 12° S, 269° E.” ■-. ◆2:

The island’ s total area is 79,215 square kilometers. —Bea-
·- “And the dot below… the pea Dad was talking about is Long River Island!” ;■- “Bingo. · Correct.” 1|—

But Naomi isn’ t happy.

She looked up at Frederick with a worried expression.

“But aren’ t they always at war?”

“It’ s true, two wars have broken out.” :” 1” ; ; ” '',./ 1

“Twice?”

Frederick sat Naomi on his lap and explained it in simple terms.

“In 2065. As soon as the activity on the island subsided, the OCU and the USN sent a large number of people to Huffman Island. Do you know what the OCU and the USN are?”

″Wait a minute, in countries like Japan and Australia, the USN uses　USN is the U.S.　 ″Oh man, I’m totally going to get them mixed up!″

Naomi clutched her head.

Even among adults, few can accurately explain the history of the 21st century.

That’s how complicated it is.

″Okay, first off, the EC in Europe sparked a wave of integration.″ Frederick began his explanation, trying to make it as easy to understand as possible. It all started with the EC integration that took place in Europe in 2005. Ten years later,

Russia changed its name, and the Republic of Zaftora was established.

Fearing a crisis, the United States and Canada began moving toward political integration, and the South American nations proposed a merger. One

As a result, in 2020,

The United States of the New Continent (commonly known as the USN), a massive nation spanning North and South America, was born.

■The USN immediately withdrew from the United Nations, effectively rendering the UN a dead letter.

—Consequently, in the following year, 2020. —』®

Led by the Republic of Zaftora, the International Peacekeeping Organization (PMO) was established.

Countries around the world neither actively supported nor opposed the establishment of the PMO. “To put it simply, they ignored it.” Faced with this consolidation, the Asian and Oceanian regions, sensing a crisis, were left with only

one path: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

There was no other way to deal with integration except through integration itself.

However, ideological conflicts among Asian nations ran deep, and it was not until 2026 that the Oceania Common Union (commonly known as the OCU) was formed.

"The OCU and USN are the two Yokozuna, and the EC is the Komusubi. A country like the Republic of Zaftora probably only has the strength of a Maegashira, right?"

Naomi said. "Yokozuna, Komusubi, and Maegashira at best… huh. That's quite a clever way of putting it." "There was a teacher in elementary school who loved sumo, and she taught me that."

At Suri's request, Naomi attends a Japanese school.

Explaining it using sumo, Japan's national sport, is typical of a Japanese teacher.

That said, in today's sumo world, the Japanese are like the Zaftra Republic of the sumo world.

When a Japanese sumo wrestler occasionally defeats a top-ranked wrestler from Africa, Europe, or other Asian countries and wins a match, it makes the top headline in the sports newspapers.

"But why would two Yokozuna go to war on a tiny island like Huffman Island?" It was a simple but spot-on question.

To answer in textbook terms, Ni, "two" –

"In Search of Precious Underground Resources." 1 1 Ji 1 · As a New Resort of the 21st Century.

That's the official line.

The real reason was to secure a military base.

Huffman Island lies right in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, where the two nations face off.

It is located in a spot that both nations covet desperately.

Allowing the other side to take it so easily would be a blow to their prestige.

Predicting a clash was easier than 1+1. Ichiichi In fact, five years after activity on the island had subsided—in 2070—

The first conflict broke out over the claim to sovereignty.

・Commonly known as the First Huffman Conflict.

It was a quagmire of war. ・1^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ But just before it began, the PMO intervened. —〈

The Republic of Zaftora, with its meager national power, seized the moment to step forward. Since the OCU, USN, and EC had all, albeit reluctantly, acknowledged the PMO's existence, they had no choice but to accept this mediation.

Representatives from the OCU and USN signed the Huffman Treaty in Moscow, where the PMO headquarters is located. 〈Prohibition of the use of nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, and all weapons that pollute the environment on Huffman Island. - The island will be divided into two parts, and resources will be distributed.

Long River Island is designated an international protected area and managed by the PMO to protect the rare seabirds and rich natural environment that inhabit it. All habitation and combat activities are strictly prohibited." ■ These are the main provisions of the Huffman Treaty. 1・Since then, Huffman Island has managed to maintain peace, albeit under the tension between the two superpowers. "But last year, a second war broke out."

“H-how so?”

“It was triggered by something called the ‘Larkas Incident.’ ”

“The Larcas Incident?”

″The USN announced that a munitions factory in the Lakas District—which is part of their territory on Huffman Island—had been attacked by three OCU Vantours, resulting in the factory′s destruction. ′W, A’ Of course, the OCU denied it. They retorted that it was a lie spread by the USN...″ The two nations’ positions remained at an impasse, and eventually, the entire island of Huffman Island descended into a state of war. This marked the outbreak of the Second Huffman Conflict.

″Which side is really in the wrong?″

“That’ s a tough question.” _ Just before Park set off for Huffman Island.. Frederick spoke with him over the phone. A fragment of that conversation resurfaces in his mind. ,> - < “1… 〈In response to the USN’ s inquiries, the OCU military reportedly stated that the Vantour pilots involved in the Larcas incident were ‘missing during combat training.’ In other words, they admitted that combat training took place in Larcas.〉

“So, does that mean the OCU violated the Huffman Treaty?”

“I’ m going to Huffman Island to investigate that. I intend to track down the OCU pilots who participated directly in the combat.” ″That’ s the plan.″ ″But, Hak. No matter how much you want a scoop, ‘life comes first.’ In this peaceful world, there’ s no need to go out of your way to a battlefield...″ ;·■■ ″Frederick, that’ s not it! You fundamentally don’ t understand.″ ’ ’-’.- ″What?! I’ m just worried !″ 11 - Consultation 〈I’ m not going to Huffman Island just for a scoop〉 “Then why on earth would you

willingly go to such a dangerous place?" 〈 "You, being born in Australia, wouldn't understand. You, who don't know the sorrow of a divided homeland: : :"

"Pak... But you're still young. *You still have plenty of time to stay with me..." 〈Thank you, Frederick. But *even so, I'm going. To Huffman Island, where the second conflict has broken out.〉 V Nee: .Come to think of it: that was the last time I heard Haku's voice. .: : ■ 1' And now, Frederick.



He is about to set out for Huffman Island—the very place he tried so hard to stop Pak from going to. “Hey, Dad. War is fought by riding robot ghosts, right?” “Robot ghosts? Oh, you mean Vantours.” Just as Naomi said, the mainstream of 21st-century warfare is indeed robot ghosts 0 ■, ;, Vandrung Panzer Commonly known as the Vantour: .· 1■ 〈Equipped with manipulators, of course, and utilizing over six hundred actuators of various sizes—which control reaction speed and durability by passing an electric current through materials that harden and soften rapidly via chemical reactions—this bipedal mobile combat weapon reproduces movements similar to those of a human〉 ::| That is the Vantour

“Naomi, did you know? Daddy can pilot a Vantour.” ＊ · · Frederick said proudly. _ᅲ◆ Naomi’ s eyes sparkled. :＊ — Zun: Nini’ ni1 “Really!?”

″Yeah. When I went to Africa on assignment, I traveled across the great plains riding a Vantza. Once, when I was attacked by a lion, ″

″So you could get away, then.″

″Huh?″

″Then you can run away right away, Dad.″ ″Instead of running away, I could take down the enemy ″Stop it! You absolutely have to run away. Because if you attack, even you’ ll get attacked.″ Tears welled up in Naomi’ s eyes.

″Naomi !″

Frederick hugged Naomi.

“Hey, Dad. Why are you going there?” Naomi asked, her voice catching in her throat. Frederick didn’ t answer.

No, he couldn’ t answer. M.

Park’ s letter. “-;” ''.1 ■ ■ That’ s a major reason.

But that’ s not all.

・In this peaceful world, the only place where the flames of war rage. ■ Something more fundamental.

Suri. Naomi.

To find myself...

I sensed someone’ s presence. .¥ I looked up, and Sayuri was standing there.

He glanced at his watch.

Frederick picked up Naomi and stood up.

“I understand. I promise,” Frédéric said.

Naomi held out her little finger.

Frederick extended his little finger and hooked it with hers.

Up. His gaze met Sayuri’ s. “Nia” ’–’–’.

There was no emotion in Sayuri’ s eyes 0 ”

Sayuri’ s heart, which had once been more transparent than my own, was now completely invisible.

″I’ ll go find it. Myself, and what lies ahead...″ Frederic turned his back without a word.

“ヾヾ, 0¥ 0¥ So

Naomi’ s voice

She walked on without stopping or looking back.

The chirping of birds echoed from the treetops.

It was a song she had heard countless times, a sound she should have been familiar with.

But right now, Frederic couldn’ t remember.

# Chapter 2

It was a spartan room surrounded by bare concrete .The air was thick with the stifling smell of sweat. ■ .Lit by dim lighting, a single man

He was sitting on a folding chair.

His elbows rested on his thighs, and his eyes were closed.

His eyes were wide open, his gaze fixed on the floor in front of him. His focus was unfocused. Yet, it was a cold stare that made the viewer involuntarily shiver.

The door opened.

The cheers echoing from outside grew even louder. A portly middle-aged man peered in .Shout .. ı .. ■ "Lloyd. It's about time for your turn. Get ready." With that, he left the door open, his protruding belly swaying as he walked away. The young man called Lloyd rose silently.

He left the room.

Hearing cheers, he headed down the corridor in the opposite direction. He soon emerged into a vast hangar. Bathed in dim light, several Vantours were parked there. A few men were loitering by the wall. – Spotting Lloyd, one of them called out.

"You' ve been on a winning streak lately, haven' t you? The customers would be happier if you lost once in a while." The men around him let out lewd laughter. ■ Lloyd didn' t even turn around. He walked on, his footsteps echoing. He stopped in front of the Vantour parked at the very back.

—A body painted in matte black.

"Karook"

A product of Vandam, an Australian Vanzar manufacturer.

"Low defense, but outstanding durability."

The leg parts are "Terran."

While its defense and durability are nothing to write home about, it possesses outstanding mobility. ｜Minato The light arm is equipped with a rifle that has an eerie sheen.

It was the "Ziegle Rifle," known as the phantom firearm.

・Where he got it remains a mystery. ー . Even if asked, he won't answer.

The left arm is unarmed." Person

What catches the eye most of all are the "Paraina" mounted on both shoulders. ヘMo

Among currently manufactured missile launchers, it possesses top-class range and destructive power.

But they are all covered in scars.

They bear the deep scars of countless battles.

"Equipping a Paraina? That guy hasn't lived a normal life." One of the men hanging around muttered that parting shot.

Lloyd turned his head.

Tension filled the air:^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ But Lloyd climbed into the Vantour as if nothing had happened. He walked right past the men. 1. "Ko" ' Intense lights, the ground rumbling, roars and cheers. 21 Lloyd drove the Vantour straight toward it. Huffman Island. An arena located in the city of Barinden, within the Oshiana Joint Federation. The combatants are Van Tours versus Van Tours.

It was the only form of entertainment on Huffman Island during the war. “1,” —Those confident in their skills participate in the competition, dreaming of striking it rich.” “” .■ A Serious Match—Even if you die, you can’t complain.—1 No one mourns you. The end result is that the corpses get showered with shouts and spit from the customers who bet big money. Lloyd is walking down the passageway leading to that arena. Standing by the side of the passageway is the fat man from earlier ·

He was the owner of this place.

Lloyd’s winning streak must have boosted his pocket money.

Over the past few weeks, the flesh on his belly had sagged even more hideously.

"Are you planning to settle this with a quick attack again today?"

He asks loudly.:;;: .■· : No answer..0: "Ichigo 1-13:22ヽセ "Watch out. Your opponent today, that guy Alder, is a hopeless old drunk, but he’s been flying since the Van Tour was first built. He’s got plenty of experience, at least." Lloyd passed silently in front of the man. ノ■ But he stopped immediately.

A man was standing right in front of him, blocking his path. “He’s a big guy.” He’s wearing an OCU military uniform. The rank insignia on his sleeve is that of a colonel. .1■二 ’; Hidden behind sunglasses, his expression is impossible to read.

“This is the athletes’ passageway. I can’t have you just barging in here.” The owner said.

Ignoring the words, the man in uniform looked up at the Van Tour and said . “Lloyd Clive - isn’t it~·”

Hearing his full name, Lloyd’s eyes narrowed.

Who are you?”

The owner stepped between them. “Look, it’s Lloyd’s turn. The crowd is getting restless. Hurry up and go.” An announcement echoed throughout the venue. ■ 〈Today’s main event. Currently on a 25-fight winning streak, the Ruler of Hell .Lloyd - is about to make his entrance—·〉 ■ “Go on. We’ll talk later.” The man in the uniform cleared a path .Lloyd stepped out into the arena.

The stands were overflowing with spectators. - .. Everyone’s eyes were bloodshot.

The air was thick with the killing intent of a situation ready to explode at any moment.

〈And facing him is the seasoned veteran, Alder Weiss!〉 A tan-colored Vantour appeared from the aisle in front. It was unclear whether it was rust or paint.

″You little punk, don't get too cocky just because luck's been on your side for a bit.″ A snide voice echoed from the radio.

I heard a gulp. It sounded like he was drinking inside the Vantour.

“I hate cocky young punks like you. I’m gonna smash that crow-like Vantour of yours and make sure you can’t fight again.”

Alder kept goading him.

Lloyd didn’t respond.

"All right, let's begin the battle. Ready Go!" A roar of cheers erupted. · · ^^^ · · Arda—moved. -71:--;;>;--":.^ . He readies the bazooka equipped on his right arm, the "Boa 36."

Lloyd didn' t move.

He didn' t even assume a defensive stance; he simply spread his arms wide.

He was completely defenseless. Ni ノ Ni· "W-What the— U ::Billi -;-" .^ Seeing Lloyd' s attitude, which seemed to suggest he had given up on the fight, Aldar' s Vanzar came to a halt. The moment Aldar stopped, Lloyd' s right arm moved. : ー ^ The Tweige Rifle flashed twice. ı Before he knew it, both arms of Alder' s Vanzar had vanished cleanly,

'Less than three seconds had passed since the start. ᆩ .. "ー .. ı .. 、 ー. !

·It was a brilliant lightning-fast attack. ·

It took nearly ten seconds for the arena, which had fallen silent for a moment, to be filled with cheers once more.

: "A-amazing. Lloyd, the Ruler of Hell. That makes twenty-six wins in a row." 21 .. .Lloyd turned his back as if the fight had nothing to do with him. ᆣ He started walking away.

"W-wait!"

Aldar called out to him.

"You' re trying to kill yourself, aren' t you? Otherwise, you wouldn' t fight like this." Alder said.

Lloyd didn' t answer.

"I, I won' t let you do that! Listen, I absolutely won' t allow a guy younger than me to rush off to his death!" Alder shouted. - ■ Lloyd returned to the hangar in silence.

When Lloyd returned to the cramped waiting room, a man in a military uniform was waiting for him.

“That was a splendid victory. All that trouble searching for you was worth it,” “You were looking for me 17 Go

Lloyd looked at the man in the military uniform.

″I'm Colonel Olson of the OCU Army. I've come to recruit you.″ ı

The man smirked, his lips twisting.

“I’ m not interested in the military.”

Lloyd sat down on a folding chair.

Ignoring the man who called himself Olson, he peeled off the bandage wrapped around his hand.

“Don’ t worry. I have no intention of calling you back to the military.”

Lloyd looked up.

“Looks like you’ ve already done your homework on me.”

“It’ s been a year since the Larkas incident. I’ ve been looking for you, Lloyd Clive. I never imagined you’ d be scraping by in a seedy arena like this.”

A dull gleam flashed in Lloyd’ s eyes. Two■

He quickly covered them up, as if to hide them.

“The situation on the battlefield is extremely unfavorable for our OCU forces. Moreover, the regular army is nothing but prideful

and are of no use. To break through this stalemate, we need the strength of real soldiers. “That is why we have formed a combat-ready mercenary unit. It is named ‘Canyon Crow.’ I will serve as its commander.”

“A Canyon Crow? A fitting name for outcasts.”

“I want to entrust the command of that outcast unit to you ”.

“Me, the captain〜”

Olson nodded.

Lloyd stared at Olson.

As if trying to read his true intentions.

But behind his sunglasses, it was impossible to tell what he was seeing or thinking. “Go home. I have no intention of going to the battlefield”. ■Lloyd stood up.

He turned his back on Olson. He took off his shirt and wiped the sweat from his face with it.

“So you have no intention of avenging your lover?”

“What did you say—”

He closed in on Olson with ferocious force.

At 186 centimeters, Lloyd was slightly taller. ’.・ ″Co ·ni- Olson is also over 180 centimeters tall. .Chi-; .>:ni-:do ., ni・ ″How do you know that?″

His eyes and lips trembling, he pressed in on Olson.

“My lover’ s—”

Ever since Olson blurted that out, his nihilistic composure had vanished.

″Heat is radiating from your body.″ 21;’ . ♦

For an ordinary person, that alone would be enough to terrify them. -:・ ,’■ It was that intense.

Yet Olson remained completely unflustered.

He spoke with his usual composure. “I do at least check up on the people I hire. A man who caused the Larkas Incident, lost his lover, had his very existence denied, and fell so

low as to become a gladiator, wandering the streets of Hafman Island—that' s you." —Hmm... ■';'; Lloyd grabbed Olson by the collar.

® He yanked him up.

"Well, did I say something wrong?"

Olson let a smile play on his lips.

Lloyd let go of him.

He turned his back and walked to the wall, slamming his fist against the concrete.

"Sitting around here doing nothing won' t solve anything." "I' m not sitting around. I' m saving up money—" "To use that money to hunt down your lover' s killer, is that it? You' re naive." "Compared to a year ago, when you started this war, the situation has only gotten worse. You need to realize that there' s absolutely no chance of doing anything on your own outside of the arena." Lloyd' s fist dug into the wall. His flesh tore, and blood spurted out. "If you join a unit, you' ll have a chance to find Vantour, the man who stole your lover." Lloyd stared at the dark red blood oozing from his fist. "Tomorrow. Come to the military office on the outskirts of town at 1:00 p.m. I' ll give you your orders there. There' s no time to waste."

Olson spoke without waiting for a response, then left the room. 5^i ノ "

He slammed his left fist against the wall. ;;-:1 The pain resonated more in his heart than in his fist.

# Chapter 3

His head throbbed. /l:-: Last night. He’ d drunk heavily at his regular bar, the “Wildcat.” He didn’ t return to the boarding house until nearly dawn.

I woke up to the noon chime. Ni1, The smell of sweat and alcohol, the damp room. ″

Lying in bed, I stared at the ceiling for nearly half an hour. :;<1.1 In a daze, without thinking, Lloyd stood up.

He left the room. ■

At the inn’ s entrance, a middle-aged woman with curly hair was reading a newspaper while muttering to herself.

“I’ m not coming back,”

Lloyd said.

The woman looked up and

“I can’ t give you your deposit back. You said you’ d be staying for several months,” she shrieked in a high-pitched voice. -2- 1 The sound echoed in his head: ·221’ “You don’ t have to give me my money back.”

Lloyd gestured for her to stop.

A sly smile appeared on the woman’ s face.

She hid her smile before Lloyd could see her and said in a sulky voice: ■.2, “Even if you change your mind and come back, it’ s no good. I’ ll take an advance payment again, you know.” War makes people’ s hearts cold and greedy.

In her case, though, the war doesn’ t seem to be the only cause. ;1 - · Lloyd went outside.

The blazing sun was blinding.” ;.. ■ He walked without thinking.

Ten minutes later.

He was standing in front of the OCU military office on the outskirts of town.

“Captain Lloyd. Captain Lloyd ,″

I heard a voice.

He turned around. A look of surprise flashed across Lloyd’ s face.

“Sakata! What are you doing here?”

ta:^^^ ■

It had been since the Larcas incident.

Ryuji Sakata, my former subordinate and the man who saved my life, was standing right in front of me.

“Captain, how have you been?”

Sakata flashed a friendly smile at Lloyd.

“Stop it. I was kicked out of the military a year ago. I’ m not a captain anymore.”

“No, you’ re still the Captain. I took this job because I was told I’ d be working under you.”

“What? You’ re kidding—”

“A few days ago, Colonel Olson recruited me.”

“Sakata ”

Sakata smiled. Looking up at the blue sky,

“I’ ve been staying on this island ever since I was discharged from the military. It’ s hard for me to go back home.”

“……” ▪I I 1■

“I looked for you, Captain. You just left the hospital without a word.”

Man″

“Come on, I’ m just kidding. But here we are, meeting again. Well, it’ s already one o’ clock. Let’ s head into the office.” >ww

″But-″

“Be punctual. Didn’ t you tell me that, Captain?”

Pushed by Sakata, Lloyd stepped through the door of the military office.

Urged on by Sakata, Lloyd entered the conference room he was led to. :i , Olson was nowhere to be seen. 1

He must be in his early twenties. ......

Long, flowing blonde hair. Skin so white it was almost translucent.

She was a beauty who looked like she’ d stepped right out of a fashion magazine spread.

She sat in a chair with her slender legs crossed, a cigarette held between her slender fingertips. The menthol smoke tickled his nose.

The woman, upon seeing Lloyd and the others, put out her cigarette and stood up.

“Natalie. I’ ve brought Captain Lloyd.”

Sakata spoke to the woman. It seemed they had already met. The woman quickly straightened her back and saluted. ″Nice to meet you. I'm Natalie Blakewood. I’ll be serving as your second-in-command on the *Canyon Crow*. It's a pleasure to meet you.″ ″I'm ″■-Mon-i-ro-id stammered.

It seems he’ s already been assigned to the role.

“What about Keith and Joinas?”

Sakata asked Natalie.

″There was an emergency request, so they headed to the scene ahead of us.″ ″What? They’ re deploying right after formation?″ ″The situation is urgent. We don’ t have time to dawdle. Currently, the OCU only holds control over three cities: Barinden, New Millgan, and Menasa.″

Natalie said resolutely.

Despite her beauty, she had been thoroughly trained as a soldier. .1· That’ s how it looks.

“Are things really that bad?” Sakata’ s expression darkened. “What’ s more, we just received a radio report that an OCU transport truck was attacked while moving supplies from Menasa to New Milligan, so Keith and the others have been dispatched.” The door leading to the inner room opened. −1J, Ni;’ ;.−^^^^^^^ Olson appeared.

“Have you explained the situation?” 21;... he asked Natalie. J: Natalie saluted.− − , “All right, then, let’ s move straight into the operation. A transport plane is waiting at the airfield.” 2− “W-wait a minute. I’ m not ready yet,” Lloyd said. ■—” :2;;■−ノ−. 「. 「— Natalie and Sakata’ s gazes converged.

Olson approached Lloyd.

He whispered so the other two couldn’ t hear.

“Your subordinates are the four of us here—Natalie and Sakata, plus Keith and Joynas, who’ ve already headed to the scene. You have command authority over the unit.Use the four of them as your pawns. Also, if you successfully carry out this rescue, I’ ll pay you a thousand Hafmandor as a contract fee.” : ■ · Even if you win in a packed arena, you’ d be lucky to earn fifty Hafmandor. Ni “After this mission, you can decide whether to continue or quit. It shouldn’ t be too

late even after you’ ve received the contract fee.”

Lloyd stared at Olson.

As usual, a mysterious smile played on his lips.
-” ;^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ J - Instead of answering Olson, Lloyd looked at Sakata.

“Let’ s go.”

“Yes, Captain Lloyd!”

Sakata and Natalie stood at attention and saluted simultaneously.

“What kind of vehicle are we using? What about weapons? What’ s the enemy situation?” ^,.:

Lloyd fired off a barrage of questions as he walked.

Natalie responded to each one with precise answers.

Before he knew it, his hangover headache had vanished. 3″ A chill of tension enveloped Lloyd’ s entire body. ⊥ It was a unique kind of tension he hadn’ t felt in a year.

# Chapter 4

″Damn. We're surrounded. What do we do, JJ?″ Keith muttered over the radio. ″It's your fault for pushing forward just because you were bored,″ replied Joinas—commonly known as ″JJ.″: · “What the hell are you talking about? You’ re the one who said we’ d wipe out the enemy and split the bounty.” “I just said I wanted to earn a little extra to send home.”

″You're such a jerk.″

The two Vantours are surrounded by eight USN Vantours. The situation is absolutely hopeless.” .Ze^^ ■However.· ;

The two of them aren’ t as tense as the conversation suggests.

If anything, it’ s the opposite.

There was laughter in their voices.

They were enjoying the situation.

″You guys, it'd be better for you to just surrender quietly.″ A radio transmission came in from the enemy commander.

Keith and JJ burst out laughing at the same time. r: “Hey, w-what do you think? One

Keith is laughing so hard he’ s holding his stomach.”  “I “He’ s a scary guy. I’ m going to do this!” * JJ’ s gleaming silver Vantour ■ moved. , ヽ'、¥ It danced. ·**·M The massive Vantour moved as if a butterfly were fluttering: 1. It was a tactic only JJ, with his uniquely African springiness, could pull off. < ″I... I can't believe it. Something like this...″ Before the speechless Commander's eyes, JJ gracefully danced down. ·Just before landing. .^^^^^^^^^ ·

His arm exploded. Shōen. The grenade in his left arm, the "Thunderbolt," spewed gunpowder smoke. Just as JJ landed without a sound.

A gaping hole had been torn through the Commander's body, from his chest to his back. · With a single blow, the Commander was dead.-- "Instant death, huh? Still the same boring way of fighting. If it were me, I'd do this." Keith's green Vantour crouched down. He planted his feet on the ground.° ^^^^ "■" Sparks flying, he dashed through the enemy Vantours. "2:1.· It's like a sparkler." ;-1 1 "And that's about it,"

Keith stopped moving and muttered.

Both arms of the stationary enemy Vantour have been completely destroyed. I knocked them off with the "F-1 Longtonfa," the striking weapon mounted on the right arm-! And yet, I didn't leave a single scratch on its legs or body 0. But having lost both arms equipped with weapons, it can't fight back. ';Niny "·" "二^^^^^^^

"R-retreat!"

The enemy Van Tour dashes off like a rabbit.

"Whoa, I won't let you get away that easily."

Keith murmurs with a smile.

·His left arm

is a machine gun, the "Dark Hog."

The legs of all seven Vantours have been completely destroyed. "And yet, the bodies of all of them are completely unscathed.

"It took me five seconds. I wanted to get it under 0.5 seconds per unit." Keith checked his watch and clicked his

tongue. ″We... we surrender. We’ ll get out of the Vantours, so don’ t attack us.″ A radio transmission came in from the enemy.^^ – – With both arms’ weapons taken and its legs destroyed, it couldn’ t attack or retreat. “No need for that. We’ re mercenaries. We haven’ t been ordered to take you guys prisoner. The only order we’ ve received is to kill you.”

Keith smirks.

Slowly, he approaches the enemy Van Tour.

″W-what are you planning to do? ″

“What do you mean, ‘what’ ? I’ m going to do this.”

He thrust the F-1 Long Tonfua into the body.

・A scream over the radio. Then, immediate silence. 1

He pulled the hand rod out of the body.

Red liquid clings to it thickly. ·· ·· . ·· ·· ·· . * .
“A clean hit.”

■Keith let out an innocent laugh. “·-—·- ┐ ” . He slowly approached the Vanzar next to him. “H-hey, stop it. I don’ t have any weapons left.” “Why aren’ t you more careful? Since you came here to shoot it out, you should’ ve brought more weapons with you.”

“There are jerks like you in the OCU ″;-Niw

The roar of Kiss’ s machine gun 0, “Three-one”

“I don’ t deserve to be called ‘you bastard’ by an USN monkey.” He slowly moves to another Vanzar.

″H-help me ″

The enemy was, o-o, <terrified

“Oh my, I just love obedient little guys. I’ m going to take my time and cook you up nice and slow.” He taps the body with a hand rod.

He adjusted his strength so as not to destroy it, but merely to deform it. ◆2’’’’;

The enemy’ s scream echoed.

“Oh, you’ re still alive. Don’ t die just yet.”

He was enjoying the sight of the twisted body crushing the soldier’ s form.

″Cut it out. You’ ve got such bad taste, as always.″ 1 1 1

J J said.

“Let’ s not interfere with each other’ s combat preferences.” ) 2

″I can't just let that slide. Look up.″

It’ s an OCU Land Defense Force transport plane. : :

Three Vantours are dropping down by parachute. 1 ’

″Damn. Jiyama’ s in there.″

Keith says, looking frustrated.

“I’ m not splitting the bounty five ways. Sorry, but I’ m going to settle this—

JJ’ s Vanish spewed fire 0-

“Can’ t be helped. We’ ll have to save the rest for another time.”

Keith pulls the trigger on his Dark Hog. Just as the three machines were falling...

All the enemy Vantours had been reduced to scrap metal. ;L

″To go this far... I heard the enemy’ s surrender signal over the radio (0).Keith, why?″ ″What can I do? Things

just... ended up like this." Keith showed not a shred of remorse.

“But there’ s no need to slaughter unarmed enemies without even capturing them.” Sakata is furious.

Keith looked fed up and said,

“That’ s why I hate ex-soldiers. We’ re mercenaries, you know. If we die, we get nothing. To survive, we have no choice but to wipe out the enemy.”

“Even if we’ re mercenaries, there are rules to battle.”
“Are those rules going to save my life?” “That’ s not what I’ m saying.”

“Both of you, stop it. This isn’ t the time for that.”



Natalie shouted while piloting the crimson Vantour. Turning to Lloyd,

“Captain, please take command.”

But Lloyd, assessing the situation, said,

“Looks like we didn’t even need to come,” Keith exclaimed.

“You really know your stuff.”

″Damn it...″ Sakata’s voice boomed over the radio. “Ignore the first... Natali—

″Anyway, the mission seems to have been a success. The order got a little mixed up, but Captain Lloyd, Keith Karabere, and Joinas Juliaska. Both are members of Canyon Crow,″ she introduced.

“Nice to meet you. Just call me JJ.”

Raising his right hand, Joinas greeted them. Keith said curtly,

“The Thunder Soldiers are strictly a private unit. If anyone points a weapon at me, I’ll kill them regardless of the circumstances. Keep that in mind.”

“Keith. What kind of tone is that to use with the captain!”

Sakata stepped forward.

“Sakata, cut it out. We’re retreating. Natalie, call for backup.”

“Captain. Colonel Olson has ordered us to move to New Milgan with the main force after the operation is complete.” — “Whoa, Natalie. JJ and I carried out this operation just the two of us. Make sure to report that accurately.”

Keith says.

“What do you mean?”

“It means Keith and I are splitting the reward money.”

JJ explained.

Sakata growled.

Lloyd silences Sakata and says,

“Got it. I’ll report it that way too.”

″Just as I expected, Captain. You know how to handle things. That blue-haired kid needs to grow up a bit faster.″

Keith tapped Sakata’s blue-glowing Vantour with his Longtonfa and dashed off a step ahead.

It’s incredible speed.

By the time Sakata’s machine was up and running, Keith was already a hundred meters ahead.

# Chapter 5

“Captain, what do you think of Keith and JJ〜.”

Sakata asked. His speech was slurred.

In the streets of Milgan.

It was the counter of a bar called “Jiira.”

A bottle of Chivas Regal sat in front of the two of them. The amber liquid was less than a third full. ■ ,’ Sakata spoke rapidly.

“Hey, Captain. Those guys are crazy. Especially Keith. Don’ t you think so?” Lloyd didn’ t answer the question, but instead,

“Sakata. It’ s been a year since you left the military. What have you been doing?”

he asked.

"Even if you ask me..."

"Was that so?"

“No. It’ s been ■ years since I last rode a Vantsa.” ■

“I’ ve been riding it the whole time. Fighting the whole time.” :

"Where exactly are we going to fight?"

Lloyd didn’ t answer; he just took a sip from his glass.

“Hey, Captain. Are we really the ones who started this war? We were just out on a reconnaissance mission, but we got ambushed by the enemy, and on top of that, Karen…”

“Sakata!”

He slammed his glass down on the counter.

The bar fell silent, and all eyes turned to him. ・ ・ Lloyd

poured whiskey into his glass.

“I’ m sorry,” Sakata said, and fell silent.

The customers’ stares quickly faded, and the commotion returned.

“So this is your second time in a real fight in a year, right?”

Lloyd asked.

Sakata replied, “Yes.”

“Real combat isn’ t about thinking. It’ s about action. Ruthlessness survives, not compassion. Regardless of good or evil.” “Regardless of good or evil…”

Sakata stared at his glass with a solemn expression.

″If you can’ t handle it, you’ d better quit,″ Lloyd said, placing five half-mandor bills on the counter and rising to his feet.

“Captain. We finally met again. I… I wanted to see you…”

“It’ s your life. You decide.” 1” He heard Sakata calling out. ˜—:—˜ — He didn’ t look back.

He left the bar. .^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

It was cold. 1.

I wasn’ t drunk at all.

Is my cell phone ringing?^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Lloyd looked at the clock by his pillow.

〈5:21 AM〉

The light filtering through the curtains wasn’ t very bright yet.

He picked up the phone. ·

It was Olson.

"One of our small transport planes has crashed on a mountainside 30 miles to the northeast. Fly to the site immediately by helicopter and recover the cargo. It' s within our national territory, but it seems USN forces are already on their way."

Lloyd jumped out of bed. 1 ヽ –'

He quickly got dressed and headed for the military office.

Before I even had time to think, I was already acting.

What I said to Sakata at the bar last night.

I had intended to think about it as my own problem.

If it doesn' t work out, maybe I should quit.

Maybe it' s not Sakata who should quit, but me.

Before I could reach that conclusion, the mission was already driving Lloyd forward.

Behind the office, a large helicopter was waiting with its rotors spinning. Natalie was already aboard the Van Tour inside the helicopter. Right after Lloyd, Keith and JJ boarded the helicopter. Even after the three of them had boarded the Van Tour, Sakata still hadn' t shown up. "It' s been ten minutes since we called him. Does that guy even have any motivation?" Olson grimaced. "Let' s leave him behind. That Japanese rich kid," Keith said, yawning.

"Good idea. It' ll increase our bounty." JJ agreed.

"What should we do?"

Natalie asked.^^^|^《1—2 "Let' s go," Olson ordered.

Lloyd said.

"We don' t have time."

Olson' s tone grew harsher.

"I' ll make the call in combat. Wait one more minute,"

·◆Lloyd asserted:.;1

"Oh, come on. This is exactly why ex-military guys

Keith' s exasperated voice.^^^^^^:- Lloyd looked at Sakata' s unmanned Van Tour.

The whole thing is blue, a uniform color. ■

″When I was a kid, I used to go fishing at the sea with my dad and older brother. Surrounded by the blue sea and blue sky . Even now, whenever I see the color blue, I remember those days." Sakata' s words from before came back to him.:J

"Thirty seconds have passed. By now, the USN must be recovering the cargo from the OCU transport." 1' "Captain. Let' s go."

Natalie... sighs.

″It' s time!″ Olson shouts.

The hatch closes.

The gap—less than a meter

Sakata dives in headfirst. ^.4-- "Well, well, we' ve been hit by a human rocket," Keith laughs.

″This isn't the time to be laughing. We're splitting the reward five ways, you know.″ ; Even JJ's voice sounded strangely cheerful as he said that. ″Sakata, you're way too late. What were you doing?″ Natalie shouted. ';: 二″」- Her tone was like a lash of a whip. Sakata, showing no sign of remorse, stuck out his tongue and said, "I woke up in a panic and threw up from a hangover."

He climbed into the Van Tour and looked over at Lloyd. Their eyes met.

Sakata smiled.

It was a defiant-looking smile.

Lloyd smiled back.

His cheeks tensed.

Sakata's smile was that of someone who had found something. Even if he hadn't found it, he was drawing a line under his feelings. That's why it looked so defiant. But his own was a forced smile. . : : He had come here without finding an answer. Lloyd looked away. He settled himself inside the Van Tour. He closed his eyes and let the helicopter's sway carry him.

"Captain. We've arrived at the scene. USN forces are approaching!" Natalie reported.

"Good. We'll retrieve them before the enemy spots us. All units, launch!" Five Vantours dropped from the helicopter. They landed among the trees. :ー- The enemy hasn't spotted us yet.

"Hey. There's someone over there!" Keith pointed toward the crashed transport plane. :< Right next to the transport, an orange Vantour was staggering along. ″It's a civilian. Ugh, if you're wandering around there, the enemy will spot you for sure.″ JJ clutched his head. ″・:・■″ ″You there, civilian. Retreat immediately. This area is dangerous!″ Natalie sent a radio message. / No response...

Natalie repeated the order in a tense voice. …- When she repeated it for the third time,

"I'm in the middle of a report right now. Don't bother me," came the reply. "Wait… 'In the middle of a report'? This is a battlefield!" "I came all the way from Japan

knowing that.”　“Who are you?”

″Right now, the interview comes before introductions.″
'Hmph.' · What an arrogant reply.

Natalie, seething with irritation,

“State your name!”

“Frederick Lancaster. Reporter for the Tokyo Times. That’s all!”　“The enemy is coming. Hurry up…” ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^! · “It’s no use, Natalie. That guy’s turned off the radio.” Keith said. ·　“You idiot. You’re taking this war too lightly!”

Sakata yelled.

“Captain, w-what should we do?”

“Anyway, let’s hurry too. All aircraft, advance!”　;'''' “ “–^^^^^^^

# Chapter 6

“I won’ t let anyone get in the way of a scoop like this.”

Frederick cuts the radio.

He maneuvered the Vanzar with all his might.

He approached the crashed transport:^^^^^^^^^^ It had been a week since arriving on Huffman Island: ’ Ni. At a hotel in New Milgan, he casually got up to use the restroom at dawn. He couldn’ t sleep.Casually, he turned on the radio interceptor: ;:1· It’ s a habit he’ s picked up since coming to this island. ; “’ That’ s how he happened to learn of the OCU transport’ s crash. ’; Ni; A’ In a panic, he jumped into his Vanzar and rushed over. ’1 The Vanzar is a used model he bought after arriving on the island. It’ s falling apart in places. Its movements are clumsy

But it’ s better than nothing.

Judging by the radio transmission, it seems the transport plane was shot down by someone. What’ s more, it appears to have been carrying some kind of important cargo. I made my way here with my map and compass in hand.

It looks like I was the first one here.

"This is terrible."

The transport plane was split right down the middle, as if a pole had been snapped. There are probably no survivors.

It' s a wonder it hasn' t caught fire yet.0 I approach the point where the transport plane snapped in two.

The wreckage is in the way, so I can' t get inside. I peeked inside through a gap. I can see the cargo.—;:.;,;:—. A large wooden crate:J, with writing on the side. "丶丶, 〃 Missi…:·nchi , Saka….:N:Da··To, …:〃 The crate is crushed, so I can only make out bits and pieces. "Damn it. What does it say?" I lean forward.

A jolt ran through me. ::J," and I was in zero gravity. ;^^^^^^^^^^^^^ The Van Tour floated.

I' m slammed into the ground.

I look up.

It' s a USN Vanzer.

Two, three... there are eight of them.

Smoke is rising from the bazooka on the lead Vanzer. "Looks like I got hit by that.

"This is no joke."

Frederick frantically turned on his radio.

"Hey, can you hear me? Don' t attack. I' m a civilian."

"A civilian? What are you doing?"

A USN commander responded. ・ "It' s a press interview. He' s a newspaper reporter. He means no harm. So don' t attack him." Frederick raised both hands high. But a USN soldier shouted.

"Captain! He' s the enemy. His comrades are closing in from behind!" "You bastard, you tricked us. Open fire!" ■ The

USN Vantours all went into combat mode at once. “No, wait, no! I’ ve got nothing to do with them. Stop!”

But the USN soldiers’ guns were firmly trained on Frederic as well. “Damn it. They won’ t listen to reason. But I can’ t die here…” Frederic turned his back on the USN and began to run.

Approaching Canyon Crow.

″Sorry about earlier. I need your help.″

He shouted into the radio. .^^^^^^^^

“Captain, what should we do?”

Natalie asked.

″I can't just leave a civilian to die. Provide cover.″

″But what about that civilian? Could they be an enemy spy...?″; I.匚ニ- ″You're right, something does seem off.″

Keith was suspicious too. · “These days, it’ s suspicious enough that they’ re even riding in such an old-fashioned van.”

JJ agreed.

Sakata says in a tense voice,

“The USN is targeting the civilian aircraft. Oh, both wings have been blown off.”

“Poor guy. He’ s all alone and surrounded.” Keith’ s tone suggested he was enjoying the situation. Lloyd shouted toward the civilian aircraft. · “Get down on the ground and dodge the attack!” ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^! “O-okay.”

Frederick’ s Vantour threw himself to the ground. Lloyd shouted to the Canyon Crow crew. Battle Stance J:

″Roger-!″

As if to say, “I’ m done here,” Keith’ s Vanzar slithered along the ground.

“I’ m taking down three of them. I wish they’ d pay me on a commission basis for how many I take out.” JJ soared into the air.■ ■ Within a minute of the two of them starting to move, half of the enemy Vantzers had been wiped out. JJ destroyed their bodies with precise, single strikes. — ·; One. As usual, Keith destroyed their arms and legs. He savored the frightened reactions of his opponents as he delivered the finishing blow. “What a bunch of losers. At this rate, there’ s no room for us to step in.”

Sakata said, speechless.

“This is mercenary warfare. The more enemies you kill, the more money you make.” ■ Lloyd shot down the enemy Missiler’ s incoming launcher with a missile®. As he rushed forward, he finished him off with his Ziegler rifle.

“I-I can’ t believe it. I didn’ t know the OCU was this strong.” The enemy commander’ s astonishment could be heard over the radio. :, A He’ d already been taken out by Keith, and only his body remained. “Oops, a souvenir for the afterlife. We’ re not the OCU’ s regular army.” Keith said with a smirk in his voice. One

“W-who are you, then? 17 Go

″Canyon Crow. An OCU mercenary unit. Make sure to tell our friends who went to the afterlife first, too,″ L: 〈, ″— --> No sooner had he said that than the F-1 Longtonfa on his right arm pierced the commander’ s body. ″C-Canyon Crow? ″ The enemy’ s radio feed cut out. —

“Captain. We’ ve destroyed all enemy aircraft,”

Natalie reported.

“It took less than three minutes against eight USN regular army Vanzers. Unbelievable,” Sakata exclaimed in surprise.

“Don’t be surprised, kid. Wasting your energy just makes you hungry.”

JJ hummed to himself.

Laughing in agreement, Keith said,

“Come to think of it, is that idiot still alive～·” “Hey, you idiot—·” No reply. ·

“So, I guess you really have to die to get better, huh?”

″Mmm, mmm, mmm!″

Following a dramatic cough, Frederick said.

“A fool who calls others fools is a fool who doesn’t realize he’s a fool himself.”

“Unfortunately, he’s alive.”

Sakata asked:

Frederick, without a hint of remorse,

“Thanks to that, I managed to scoop an amazing battle.”

″I'm fine,″ he said, putting on a brave face.

“W-what?”

“Are you really a reporter for the Tokio Times?”

″I wouldn't lie about something like that.″

“The Tokio Times, right? That’s the Japanese newspaper with the highest circulation in the world, isn’t it?”

“I’d like you to say, ‘the world’s number one newspaper headquartered in Japan,’” ■ “So even a top-tier newspaper like that has a clueless idiot like you working there,” Keith teased.

Frederick doesn’t flinch.

“You can’t land a scoop without this kind of initiative.”

“I’m appalled. You were this close to dying,” Natalie said.

"Whoa, look at that shiny rocket launcher!" JJ exclaimed.

Before they knew it, they were making their way inside the crashed aircraft. ’-;;ニ「:.チー1^

“I see. It says ‘missile launcher.’ Do you know who made it?”

Frederick rushed over awkwardly, moving as fast as he could.

"That’s it–it’s made by Sakata Industries."

“What’s the model name?”

"I don't know. I've never seen it before."

JJ tilted his head.

“Sakata Industries, huh? They’ve been handing out weapons like crazy lately.”

Keith said. ・- ーーー ■ Immediately, Frederick chimed in.

“Are Sakata Industries’ products really flooding the market that much?”

“Go to any gun shop–they’ve got more than you can shake a stick at.”

“What’s the word on them?” ^^^^^^^^^^^ー ー^^^^^^^^^^^^

·’· “Some are absolutely top-notch, but others are total junk. I don’t use them.” “Why?”

“If you’re facing the enemy and realize that weapon is a dud, you’ll be an even bigger idiot than you are now.” Frederick looked on with interest,

“So, both sides were fighting over the latest missile

launcher made by Sakata Industries, ”

he muttered.

“Listen. This is classified military information. You’ re not allowed to do whatever you want.” · “Whoa, I’ d like you to respect freedom of the press.”

“Don’ t you know that civilians are guilty of a crime if they interfere with combat?” “I’ m risking my life, too. I’ m risking my life to report this. …I can’ t back down.” %;- .. “Seriously, what kind of person are you, Captain?” Natalie looked to Lloyd for a decision.

Lloyd, who had been silently watching the situation unfold, spoke up.

“Keith, JJ, Sakata. Retrieve the cargo. Natalie, take that man to the military office in Menasa

“We’ re going to Menasa!?” Keith asked. “We received orders from the colonel before we took off. He said to transport the cargo to Menasa.” “That’ s because the OCU military headquarters is in Menasa.” “But rumor has it the place is completely surrounded by the USN,” JJ said.

Keith said cheerfully,

“That’ s why we’ re needed, right?”

“No doubt about it. They say where there’ s war, there’ s money buried.”

“Mudaro, enough of that—get to work!” .N—··

“Okay, boss!”

Keith and JJ climb into the wrecked transport plane. :;· Natalie pulls out a capture rope. ’· ; ■. . ■ , and wraps

it around Frédéric Vantour’ s leg.

″Wait a minute. Arresting me? · ″You committed a crime. It’ s only natural you face justice.″ ″″, . ″That’ s why, as I’ ve said time and again, I was just doing a report ″

“If you have something to say, talk to the military office. If you’ re unhappy, you can even call a lawyer.”

“!……Lawyer, lawyer… women always go straight to that……” ·: ….

“What do you mean? One

“No, I’ m the one talking. Hey, don’ t pull me. I can’ t move like this.”

“Don’ t worry, I’ ll take you there.”

Natalie 1 effortlessly hoisted Frederic’ s Vantour onto her back. To confirm what had just happened, Lloyd looked around. Sakata stood there silently.

“Sakata. What’ s wrong?”

“Sakata—”

Lloyd called out again, and he finally answered. “Y-yes. What is it, Captain?”

“Nothing. I just... ”

he mumbled.

“If they’ re safe, help Keith and JJ.”

“Understood.”

Sakata heads toward the transport.

Keith and JJ were just unloading the cargo.

“That’ s crazy. If you took a direct hit from something like that, you’ d be toast.” “But given the manufacturer, it might just be all show.”

“It’ s possible

Sakata stopped in his tracks again upon seeing the cargo.

“Hey, kid. Stop dawdling and get a move on!” Keith said to Sakata.

“I’ m not some rich kid!”

“ ?”

Ignoring the dumbfounded JJ and Keith, he went about his task silently on his own.

# Chapter 7

Menasa, a port town located slightly southwest of the center of Huffman Island. The interior of the bar ″Mistral″ was packed with people.

The five members of Canyon Crow were gathered around the table.

The conversation wasn’ t exactly lively.

Keith and JJ were puffing on cigarettes and downing drinks, engrossed in a game of Othello for stakes.

“Othello is quite the name,”

JJ said as he flipped a white piece to black.

“What do you mean?”

Keith immediately flips it back to white.

″Do you know the origin of the word?″ -..Ani:, ': ↘

″I don't know. ^^^^J

″It’ s Shakespeare.″

JJ said.

Keith laughed and said, ″2″

″To hear the name Shakespeare come out of your mouth, of all people. You might actually be an intellectual, huh?″

But JJ didn’ t laugh.

“What’ s it about?” Keith asked.

JJ answered with a serious expression.

″It's a story about a Black general being tricked by a white man.″ ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ ″…So it's a game of cat-and-mouse between black and white, then.″

Keith placed a piece on the board with a dismissive gesture.

・ JJ took the corner, and the board was flooded with black pieces. Ke:*V < “I don’ t know about Shakespeare, but in the twenty-first century, the general wins.” Keith grabbed his glass and took a swig of whiskey. JJ, expressionless, tucked the winnings into his breast pocket. A listless silence hung in the air. “You were here?”

・The five of them looked up. ・It was Frederick.

“Well, well. The convict has made a run for it from his cell,”

Keith said. ..:^^^^^^^^^^| ・

“There’ s no way I’ d let them lock me up. On the contrary, I asserted my freedom of the press and secured future reporting permission from the OCU military.”

He pulled up a chair from the neighboring table and sat down.

“Freedom of the press,” huh? What on earth brings an intellectual like you ”

JJ remarked sarcastically.

Frederick smiled vaguely and asked Lloyd...

“You’ re Captain Lloyd Clive, aren’ t you?”

Lloyd closed his eyes without a word.

“I have a request. I’ d like to join you guys.”

“Hey, you. Cut it out.”

Natalie pressed her menthol cigarette down onto the tray.

“We’ re at war here on Huffman Island. And our mercenary unit is the one assigned the most dangerous missions.”

Ignoring Natalie, Frederick turned to Lloyd and said,

“Please, I want to get to the bottom of this war.” –

“For what?” Lloyd asked.

“For what…?”

Frederick hesitated for a moment, then said,

“For the world. And…”

″And?″

“ ″Anyway, I won’ t be a burden. So please let me join the mission.″ ″If you get into trouble during the mission, we might not be able to rescue you. We might have to leave you behind.″ ″That’ s fine. I’ m confident in my ability to pilot the Vantour.″″ :1· ″With that?″ ^^n ( JJ spread his arms wide and shook his head.’ C Eva:3, 1 “Back then, the Vantour was a piece of junk. I’ ve just had it overhauled. I swapped out the legs for ones capable of high-speed movement, and I got new arms too.” · – “So that’ s why you say you won’ t be a burden?” JJ laughed. 2 Frederic retorted defiantly. —:, ‘ “.” “You guys make your living fighting, so you spend money on weapons. I make my living in journalism, so I spend money on mobility. It’ s a simple equation.”

JJ and Keith exchanged glances.

“It’ s not that easy to escape just by changing your legs.”

It’ s written there.

But neither of them said it out loud.

“Please. I’ ve already gotten Colonel Olson’ s permission.”

“I can’ t believe it. I can’ t believe Colonel Olson would allow something like that .”

Natalie shook her head.

“Do as you please.”

·Lloyd said,

“Thanks. Well then, let me know when the next assignment is set. I’ m going back to the hotel to write up today’ s incident.” 7 - Frederick left the shop at a brisk pace. 1

“Is that okay?”

Natalie says, sounding displeased.

Lloyd raised his glass to his lips without a word, as if he hadn’ t heard her.

“Lloyd’ s Team ″

Natalie stopped speaking. She reached for a cigarette. : : Ni Noa 』

■The sky. ·-▪

She crushed it. Ah, 1. Moni ″; Ni-cho m-

Keith took a cigarette out of his breast pocket. He offered it to Natalie.

:It’ s not a brand sold legally. .1 Anini:-:--.

It’ s contraband tobacco.

Both the nicotine and the tar are so intense they’ re incomparable to anything on the market.

Natalie knows that too.

He gave a wry smile and declined. /:goS-1’ Ni1·-: ″Keith took it in his mouth himself,

“What are your plans for tomorrow?” · - he asks Natalie.

“Plans?

″I mean, what are we going to do for fun?″ NiNiJ ィ 1■

“I haven’ t thought about it.”

“Then, how about you come with me? There’ s a secret spot with a great atmosphere about an hour’ s drive away.”

″No way,″

Natalie said immediately.

Keith frowned and asked,

“Why not!?”

“Colonel Olson gave us strict orders, didn’ t he? He said not to leave Menasa until we get further instructions.”

“Oh, you mean that. In that case, let’ s have some fun right here in town. Just the two of us.” Ignoring Keith’ s persistence, Natalie turned to Lloyd and asked,

“Lloyd. Do you have plans? For a

She didn’ t call him “Captain,” but used his first name.

“Then I’ ll show you around. I used to live in this town, you see. So—” “That’ s kind of you, but—”

Lloyd declined.

“Hmph. Want to go for another round?”

Kiss said to JJ.

“I’ m done with that. My philosophy is to make money on the battlefield.” “Hey, young master. Stop just sitting there drinking—want to have a go?” he called out to Sakata.

Sakata doesn’ t answer. He silently brings his glass to his lips.

“What’ s up? You’ re in a real funk today. You’ re a guy, so it’ s not like you’ re on your period or anything,” Keith teased.

Still, Sakata showed no reaction.

His face looked brooding. He stared at the table, moving only his right hand—the one holding the glass—up and down.
"Man, every single one of you guys is such a killjoy," Keith said, kicking his legs out onto the table. Leaning back in his chair, he puffed on a cigarette. A languid, and by no means pleasant, silence... A woman approached the table: it was the woman who had been glancing this way for a while.

She stood in front of Lloyd and spoke.

"Hey. Aren't you Lloyd?"

Black hair, almond-shaped eyes. She looked Chinese.

Oriental

She was a beauty with a distinctly Asian look.

Natalie answered before Lloyd could.

"And you?"

The woman with black hair didn't answer; she just stared at Lloyd and said,

"You must be Lloyd Clive. I've seen your photo before."
"A photo? Where did you see his photo?"

Natalie asked.

She didn't answer.

Her almond-shaped eyes are fixed solely on Lloyd. Natalie isn't even in her field of vision.

"Why do you know me?"

Lloyd looked up at the woman.

Their eyes met.

As if she had confirmed her suspicion,

"Just as I thought. It is you, Lloyd. You look exactly like

the photo Karen had.”

Lloyd’ s expression ■changed completely.” ?

He jumped to his feet and

“Do you know Karen?”

he said. Or rather, he shouted.” P 2

″Uh, yeah.″

″Where? Where did you meet her ”

“Where, you ask ″

She seemed startled by Lloyd’ s intensity.

The woman looked overwhelmed, her eyes wide,

“We were both hospitalized at the same hospital, and I was in the bed next to yours.”

“Huh?” ■ ■ M ・

“About two months ago. I’ ve been traveling all over this island for personal reasons, but I tripped and broke my leg. That’ s when it happened.”

“Karen… Karen is…”

“She was fine. Even when I asked, ‘What’ s wrong?’ she wouldn’ t tell me, but she looked just like anyone else. She seemed a little dazed, but I think that was probably just the medication.” “Karen… Karen is… alive…”

He muttered, dazed.

It was the first time she’ d ever looked so flustered in front of the team members.

Not even Natalie, Keith, or JJ could bring themselves to speak.

Then.

Lloyd suddenly stood up. ″

The chair toppled over from the momentum.″

He grabbed the woman’ s arms and pinned her—

“Is Karen still there?”

he pressed her.

″I... I don't know. I managed to get out after about a week ″ ″Where! Where is that hospital?″ ″Greyrock.″

Greyrock is a city located about 300 kilometers north of Menasa.

“What’ s the name of the hospital?”

“What was it again… I remember the location, though.” “Please. Try to remember.” —Natalie’ s eyes widened.

“I’ ve got it. I’ ll take you there. I’ ve got some things I want to look into, too.” The woman nodded.

“I’ m sorry. What’ s your name?”

“I’ m Yan. Yan Meihua.” The woman held out her right hand. - 1 J”. “Thank you, Yan.”

Lloyd squeezed her hand in return and thanked her.

# Chapter 8

The damp air felt cool and crisp. '.· In the western sky, the last star to remain visible faded into the dawn light. The sun had not yet risen.

It was early morning. · f

There was not a soul to be seen on Menasa's Main Street. *, –

Broken bottles and traces of vomit hinted at last night's chaos. 22> "Kō" A single set of footsteps echoed through the still-sleeping town. ;·go "A man with his hands tucked into his jacket and his back hunched walked toward them. 122■ It was Lloyd. ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^. He hadn't slept a wink. ::Sama″ni;''· He couldn't.

He slipped out of his room without a sound.

His expression is grim. 2" '2:" 2:" " ." ::.

But in his eyes, there was a single glimmer of light. A glow that hadn't been there until yesterday. It was faint, but it was a light of hope he absolutely didn't want to extinguish. "Morning!" ■ A woman's voice from the side: .^^^^^^^^^^^^M 二.': It's Yan.

"I'm sorry. So early in the morning."

Lloyd bowed his head. ;- s ″' ″ ″Don't worry about it.″

■Yan smiled. ˜ —. She started walking alongside Lloyd.

"Captain" –

It was Sakata.

"If it's all right with you, let me accompany you."

"This isn't a mission." Lloyd kept walking.

–Sakata stepped in front of him.

″Captain, have you forgotten? Karen wasn't just your fiancée— she was a comrade-in-arms to me, too.″

“Sakata…”

Lloyd’ s eyes trembled.

Sakata’ s lips trembled.

He turned his back on Lloyd.

He took the lead and started walking. : – ″ , ,'–':'– ″Oh, man...″

A big yawn.

Keith was crouching in the shadow of a dustbin.

“After you guys left yesterday, I got hit on by a hot chick. Ugh, my back hurts.” He stood up, grimaced, and stretched his back. ;– “It’ s true. The mercenary squad leader’ s secret mission. This is a scoop.” .・It’ s Frederick.

“Hey. This isn’ t a hoax, is it?”

JJ said. ':C Ni

・He held out his right hand:

Frederick placed a Hafmandor note in his hand.

“This guy is obsessed with money to the very end,” Keith said, poking JJ’ s arm.

″You got up early because you can smell money too, didn't you?″ ″Pfft. Unlike you, I'm not obsessed with just money,″ Keith said.・

Frederick immediately asked,

“What do you mean? It’ s not just about the money?”

Keith glared at Frederick.

His gaze was fierce.

Frederick instinctively flinched.

Seeing this, Keith said, “Blood. I smell blood,” grinned wryly, and started walking alongside JJ. Frederick loosened his tie and sighed.

Five men and one woman walk through the early morning streets. As they... turn the corner, another woman is standing there.

“This is a violation of orders,” Natalie said.

Lloyd walked past her without a word.

“Hey, hey, wait a sec, Lloyd!”

“If you’ re going to show her around town alone, I’ m staying,” he said, stopping. “ ” Natalie looked at Keith.

She let out a lovely sigh.

She started walking after Lloyd and the others.

“Ugh, my back hurts…” –

Keith yawned as he brought up the rear.

# Chapter 9

We’ re under attack!”

▪Yan shouted, “^^^^^^^^..1 Flames are rising from the town of Greylock.”

“USN forces, watch out!” Natalie said in a tense voice. “Yeehaw, gold!”

JJ’ s Vanza leapt into the air. “Nipe” —: ‘J’ It soared between the buildings like a giant flying squirrel.” <’ In search of the enemy ○ It landed in front of the enemy attacker who had been destroying the building. — “W-what the hell are you? ,7 The enemy attacker’ s agitated voice came over the radio. 2.’: 1◆1 ノ Before he could answer,

JJ’ s left arm unleashed a thunderbolt. With a single strike, the enemy attacker’ s body was shattered. 2” “■ Lloyd emerged onto the main street. A single civilian van was serving as a shield for the fleeing crowd.

All while under relentless attack from the USN forces. “What’ s going on? What happened?” Lloyd asked.— T “Oh, Jesus. Out of nowhere, those USN savages attacked the city and started indiscriminately targeting civilians.” A wave of anxiety washed over Lloyd. ” · Natalie asked: “I’ m Paul C. Griber. I’ m a pastor. But more importantly, please, cover us!” “But we—″

Natalie was confused.

Instead, Lloyd shouted.

“All right.”

The Tweige rifle fired.

The body of the enemy missile operator, who had been

preparing to launch a missile, was blown to pieces.

"Captain, this is a violation of orders. If Colonel Olson finds out, we're in big trouble!" Natalie said.

Lloyd ignored her.

"Sakata, provide cover for the civilian van convoy."

"Yes!"

Sakata went on high alert. '11 a

"N-no… Keith, please, stop everyone."

Natalie pleaded, clinging to him.

"It's no use, Natalie. Right now, I've got a feast even better than a woman right in front of me." With that, he glided between the buildings like a bloodthirsty wolf.

He closed in on the enemy attacker.

He readied his "F-2 Long Tonfua."

In an instant, he destroyed both of its arms.

The attacker frantically turned his back.

He immediately circled around and smashed the legs.

・Only the body remains intact. "1

The enemy attacker surrendered.

"Don' t say that. This has only just begun. I' ve been completely ignored by the woman I' ve got my eye on, so I' m in a bit of a bad mood. I' m going to have some fun." He said this in a taunting tone, looking the attacker over with a mocking gaze. · "Dostoevsky . The world' s greatest literary giant."

He murmurs in a rapt voice -01

· Player' s Vantsa

· Driscoll was turning the pages of *Crime and

Punishment*:^^^^^^^^^^

 "Captain. Enemy reinforcements have appeared!
L^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ ..

 Suddenly, the radio blared.

 But Driscoll remained calm. Keeping his eyes on the book,

 “Load the supplies onto the transport vehicle as planned.”
 “But they’ re tough opponents, and they’ re closing in on us…” His well-defined lips twisted. ^ Looking up from the book with a look of displeasure, “Do you intend to make me say the same thing twice?” His voice was subdued

 It possessed a coldness that brooked no argument.

 “O… okay.”

 “Get it done within three minutes.”

 “Y-yes!”

 ~V, V IV

"The radio's out." A deafening roar and vibrations reverberate through the van. I quietly lower my gaze to my book.

 The tension vanished immediately.

 A look of rapture drifts across his eyes as he follows the words.

Four minutes later.

 The radio crackled.

 "Captain, loading is complete." ^^^^^^^^^ It was a breathless, flustered voice. ^^^^^^^^^^ Driscoll closed the book carefully. "But this is the best we could do..." "We'll decide on the disposal later. Transport, withdraw immediately." ^^^^^^^ "Y-yes."

Driscoll looked at the monitor.

Every single USN Van Tour was being wiped out. Yet there was no sign of panic on his face. It was as if he didn’ t care at all about the deaths of his subordinates. Rather, looking at the enemy Van Tour, he thought, “That guy is the one from the Larcas incident… Lloyd, I’ m sure . Come to think of it, I heard a rumor that he joined a mercenary unit called ‘Canyon Crow’ ... ” Lloyd destroyed the Van Tour under Driscoll’ s command.

“Hmm. Quite the skill.”

A smile even plays on his lips. ,^^^^^^^!^;//: As if he were enjoying the death of his subordinates. ^^^^p L Watching the losing battle play out on the monitor, he asks into the radio, “Where’ s the transport?” 111,* ^^^’ “Yes, sir. We’ ve cleared the city.We’ ll be joining the main force shortly.” “Good. Let’ s retreat.” He aimed the Vanzaar’ s bazooka at the building in front of him. w¥—.ヽ- It spewed fire.^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ 1 * The building goes up in flames. ^0 “Canyon Crow, is it? What a tasteless name,” he muttered under his breath and began to move. With his back turned toward the ongoing battle, he walked away without even attempting to provide cover for his subordinates who were struggling. Just like Raskolnikov, the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* he had been reading until then, he abandoned them with a cold demeanor.

“Yan, where’ s the hospital?”

“It’ s that building over there!”

By the time Lloyd had mowed down the enemy Vantours and reached the hospital...

The hospital was engulfed in flames.



He cast aside his Twig Life.

"Karen, Karen!"

“Lloyd! It’ s way too dangerous. Besides, everyone’ s already burned to a crisp .” Ignoring Yang’ s voice. – · Ten minutes later. · .; In front of the hospital, Canyon Crow’ s Van Tours had gathered alongside Yang. The enemy had been wiped out.

“Where’ s the captain?”

Yang pointed at the hospital.

"No, not like that..."

The flames had already passed the peak.

Lloyd emerged from the burning ruins.

·Vantsua looked like a piece of candy melted by the heat. He immediately dropped to his knees and stopped moving.

Sakata ran over.

He called out, “

“No… there’ s nothing… I don’ t understand "

Lloyd’ s voice trailed off.

He collapses.

"Captain. Pull yourself together!"

Supported by Sakata’ s Vantour, he stopped moving.

“Oh, Jesus. Can something like this really be allowed? What on earth was God watching?”

· It was Paul Vantour, who had been working alone to rescue the civilians. ^^^^! He approached slowly, his steps heavy.

In his arms, he held the bodies of young children.

# Chapter 10

“What?”

“Anything. Can you tell me what you talked about with her… with Karen?” Lloyd said.

Yan looked at Lloyd.

Lloyd wouldn’ t meet his gaze. He had his back turned to Yang.

The rooftop of a building.

They looked down on the sprawling city of Greylock.

The scars of the USN attack are still fresh. ■ ; J It will likely take some time for the city to recover. ■ Yang stood beside Lloyd. He looked at his profile. Ni;1 A passionate emotion came through from his silent profile. -■’■ ·Toward Karen .

"Yeah, sure."

He leans against the railing.

“Karen always talked about you.”

"Me!?"

Lloyd’ s profile trembled.

"Yeah. She did regret joining the military, though..." It was true that Karen had regretted joining the military.

Lloyd had heard about it too.

Th-that time... *>J^

Karen had said .

As Lloyd listened to Yang, his mind wandered to his memories with Karen.

“I regret joining the military,”

Karen said.

″Why? You chose this path yourself, didn't you?″

"It' s true that defending the country is important.

But standing here on this island, staring down the enemy like this... it feels wrong.

That' s how I feel. Don' t you think so?"

"I can' t say I don' t feel that way…"

"But there have been good things, too. I' ve made lots of friends, and I got to meet you."

"Karen"

Karen turned her dazzling smile toward Lloyd.

"Hey. When we get married, let' s build a house on this island."

"But who knows when the tensions on this island will end…" Ni se.;: Nini>■◆ "It' ll be fine. I love this island. It has enough vitality to erase the scars of the war from twenty years ago."

″Karen

Karen' s heart was shining. :;ーー二、

Just like before. More than before.

"Karen J

Lloyd murmured. End Ni11

Gazing at the city with lonely eyes.

"Oh, man!"

Yan stretched widely.

She glanced at her watch.

″It′s already this late. I′m going to run an errand.″ ″Okay. I have an informant I know in this town.″ ″Hmm...″ ″His name is Hans, just a kid, about eighteen.A genius who got into MIT at twelve.” H ■ “But he’s a troublemaker—he hacked into the military’s central computer while he was still a student, destroyed all the programs, and got expelled. So, he was chased out of the USN and fled to Huffman Island. I’ve got some business with him. I’ll go ahead.”

″Is there some kind of trouble?″

“It’s not exactly trouble, but… well, a personal issue.” “If there’s anything I can do, just let me know.” “Lloyd, you’re such a drama queen.” – “No, I’m serious. I’m more grateful to you than I can put into words.”

″Thanks. I’ll count on you when the time comes. ″See you later.″ Yan tried to act cheerful and walked away. Once he was out of Lloyd’s sight,

He took a deep breath.

He walked toward the stairs.

″It’s you!″

It was Natalie.

“I’d love to be loved like that.”

Natalie muttered.

As if talking to herself.

“You ″

Natalie changed the subject. · “I got a call from the military office. I came to let Lloyd know.” “You just went out on your own, so aren’t you in big trouble?” Yan shrugged.

Natalie cleared her throat.

She spoke in a playful tone, mimicking Olson.

″Normally, this would be a court-martial offense, but General Blakewood, the commander of this unit, has ordered me to show leniency.

· ·So, I’ ll let this one slide, but be warned: I will not tolerate any further insubordination!” It was rare for Natalie to act so flippant.

Yan remained completely unfazed.

If the members of Canyon Crow had heard that, they would have rubbed their eyes and scratched their ears over and over again. “That’ s lucky for you. It’ s almost unheard of for the military to turn a blind eye like that. But to have the general show such leniency after you acted on your own—Lloyd really is something, isn’ t he?” Natalie listened to Yang’ s words with a complicated expression. “Z “You should tell him soon.”

Yang urged Natalie.

Natalie murmured, “Yeah .″ But she didn’ t start walking toward Lloyd.

“I’ ll pass. It doesn’ t seem like his heart is here right now…” She looked at Yang and smiled. 1 麦一 ; -· She turned back and walked down the stairs.

Yang watched her retreating figure.

Natalie’ s back looked just as lonely as the forced smile she’ d just put on.

# Chapter 11

It was a musty, dark room.

Computers lined the walls of the cramped room. J -

In the room

A man was staring at the screen and typing on the keyboard.

He was still young. Probably not yet twenty.

You could call him a boy; he has a baby face.

There was a knock at the door.

“It’ s open!”

He said this without looking up from the screen.

The door opens.

Even so, he didn’ t turn around. Nishi -

“Looks like this office is still intact.” The boy’ s back straightened with a start. He turned around quickly.

His face lit up: ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

″Yan! You came back? ,1 Go

″Yeah. Right in the middle of that battle.″

“It was the Hide group. They were carrying out indiscriminate attacks on civilians. I was this close to having my mountain of vital intel destroyed.”

The boy’ s name was Hans. ■ He was the informant Yan had told Lloyd about.

It was Hans’ s office in the basement of a building.

He rents an unused basement on the cheap.

“So, what about the information on your brother… Eihin?”

· Yan asked. · His expression was serious...

Hans spoke slowly, with his back turned to Jan,

“Nothing for now ″ He gently reached under the desk.

He quickened his movements.

He thrust both hands forward.

A pistol was clenched in his hand. E Suddenly having a gun pointed at him, Yan’ s face paled. However, the muzzle was not aimed at him. “Who are you?” : Nime Hans’ s finger on the trigger tightened. Yan turned around.

A tall man was standing at the office entrance. 2/1 “Lloyd! When did you get here?” “Sorry. I followed you.”

“Do you know him?”

Hans asked Yang, still holding his gun.

″Yes. Lloyd Clive, the captain of the OCU mercenary unit. They’ re the ones who saved this town.″

“The captain of the mercenary unit, huh. As expected, he snuck in without a sound. Though, you can’ t fool a machine’ s eye, of course.” …^^ Hans tapped the earpiece pressed against his ear.

Proudly, ^^^^

“I’ ve it set up so a silent alarm goes off whenever there’ s an intruder,” he laughs. —^! M , His expression was like that of a child showing off a toy.

“See? He’ s young, but he’ s a thorough guy, that Hans.” ■ Yan gave a wry smile. · ‘Lloyd nodded. As if acknowledging Hans. . Then he asked.

“I need you to find someone. Can you do it?”

Hans puffed out his chest.

“Of course. There’ s nothing this master hacker, Hans, can’ t find.”

“I want you to find this woman.”



Lloyd handed Hans a photograph.

"Karen..."

1 Yan muttered 0 1J, 2:·2'v Lloyd looked at Hans and said. ■ “Her name is Karen Muir, twenty-one years old. She’ s a former OCU Army lieutenant. Until two months ago, she was at the hospital in this town with Yan.” *: “W1 “She was there?!”

Hans spoke up. "1";-. : 」, '* "How ^-7^uc^?l <^^^^^^ "I hear all sorts of things through my work, you know. Hold on a sec..." Hans walked over to the shelf by the wall. : -'. : ;M 广^ · He took a disc out of the box and put it in the player. ._.. ; 一 The sound began to play. · 11 · It was a woman’ s voice. Probably an old woman’ s.” J· “It’ s me. I was admitted to a military hospital. But when I sleep there, I only have bad dreams. Dreams about fires and stuff. So I just couldn’ t help but sneak out. It’ s divided into a general ward and a military ward with research facilities— it’ s a hospital where you really can’ t relax.”

Front Mission: Frontline Report ⊥ j ⊥ /

“What’ s this?”

“It’ s a section of a phone call I intercepted by chance.”

“Yan, were there rumors like this about that hospital?”

“Come to think of it, it was a strange hospital. We couldn’ t even get near the military ward. But Riki Ren seemed to be going there, saying it was for treatment.” ■ Crucifixion

"Karen?"

Lloyd’ s voice rose an octave.

"I don't know for sure, but " 1 -■

“I’ m s-sorry.”

“No, I’ m the one who’ s sorry. I raised my voice.”

Lloyd lowered his head.

“So this woman is your girlfriend?”

Hans asked.

Lloyd gave a brief summary of what had happened so far.

“That smells fishy.  Yeah, she smells fishy. There’ s probably something going on behind the scenes.” Hans crossed his arms and closed his eyes. One

″Is he alive or dead? Just finding that out would be enough. Please, I need information.″ Lloyd bowed his head. ;: -1, ;’ He looked as if he were about to prostrate himself at any moment. j J ″Loyd″ ’-;1; Yan was so stunned he was speechless. ;.-;-;’-;’’;’.: ″,·″ ″O · K. I’ll take it on.″

Hans said.” : 1.

“I’ m sorry.”

“Since you know Yang, you can pay me later. With that settled, Hans immediately headed for the computer.

He stared intently at the screen. His ten fingers flew across the keyboard at an incredible speed. He was so engrossed, it was as if he had forgotten everything else.

″Let's go. Let's hack into a computer somewhere. I'm in the middle of an investigation. We're going to be stuck here for a while anyway,″

Yang said. >″1.

Lloyd left Hans’ s office with Yang.

“You haven’ t given up on Karen, have you?”

Yan muttered.

Lloyd didn’ t answer.

・On the contrary, a question

“You were looking for your brother?”

“Yes.    He ran away from home two years ago. I heard through the grapevine that he’ s on Huffman Island, so...”

“I hope you find him,”

Lloyd said. : -1 ・ . It was a gentle voice. ~ ♦ Yan couldn’ t help but look at Lloyd.

His profile was as stern as when he’ d seen him on the rooftop.

But... he felt he could ″see″ something he hadn't seen before.

He stopped in his tracks. —, 1· The word “charm” might come close:;

But it doesn’ t capture everything. *. ♦ : There’ s something deeper there.

That’ s how it feels.

“Hey, Lloyd.”

I caught up to Lloyd. I stepped in front of him.

Caught off guard, Lloyd stared at Yang.

“I have a favor to ask.” Ni…:

“Is this something I can do?”

″Take me with you, you Canyon Crows.″

“That’ s way too dangerous.”

“But I want to. Please.”

“But…”

Lloyd hesitated. : - - - Yan spoke, her eyes pleading and

probing.

“Isn’t the real reason you became a mercenary to find Karen?” A flicker of unease crossed Lloyd’s eyes. 7 Yan didn’t miss it.

“Right? I want to find my little brother, too. So please. I won’t be a burden.” Their gazes met.

There was a similar light in both their eyes.

A shared light—the desperate longing to find those they had lost. Confirming this, Lloyd nodded quietly. “Thank you!”

Immediately, Lloyd said in a stern tone.

“However, I can’t guarantee your safety.” “It’s okay. I’ve been getting by on this island all on my own as a single woman. I’ve crossed plenty of dangerous bridges. I’m much more reliable than some half-baked ex-soldier.” She smiled and saluted.

Lloyd grinned back and returned the salute.

# Chapter 12

Freedom City

Located in the central part of Huffman Island.

Until recently, the city had been occupied by the USN.

However, for the first time in a full year since the war began, the OCU forces have succeeded in recapturing it: The city is overflowing with OCU troops.

“What a grim atmosphere,”

Frederick looks around the city.

Buildings are in ruins, and the people’ s faces remain somber. “” “

″What can you do? The aftermath of the battle is still lingering,″ Keith said.

“But even though the OCU managed to retake it…” ·

“That doesn’ t matter. Even if we take back a town or two, nearly half of the territory is still occupied by the enemy. For a while, whether we win or lose, this is just how it’ s going to be.”

“Captain. Look at that.”

Sakata pointed ahead.

A crowd has gathered at the street corner.

Beyond it, two Vantours were engaged in combat. ;·,—¥'

"Hey, no way!"

Keith leans forward.

"An outdoor arena?"

A look of disbelief

"There' s no way they' d ever approve an outdoor arena." 』 2. "So, that means two Vanzers are fighting each other?" Frederick asked.

"I can't believe it, but I guess that's how it is."

JJ says.

"We can't pass this up."

Keith operates the Van Tour.

He weaves his way through the crowd.

Two Van Tours were engaged in a brawl. ;:2' Neither was holding back. ■"So-;'5 But it doesn't look like they're trying to kill each other.

They aren' t using the weapons they' re equipped with.

Just the Van Tours' fists against fists.

It' s just like boxing.

"Go! Jab, jab. Right straight!" Keith let out a strange cry 0 "' "Nini#1do:1ni; "Unbelievable. Aren't these guys part of the OCU regular army?" Sakata said.

"OCU regular troops fighting each other with Vants in the streets of Freedom, which we just occupied? This is a scoop." Frederick gleefully raised his camera.

"Captain, what should we do?"

Natalie asked. · " , "- m : "Leave them be! ■ It' s not even worth a single sentence. Hey, Keith, wanna make a bet?

I’ ll put a hundred Hafmandors on the silver Vantour.” ■
“Alright, JJ, I’ m in. I’ ll put a hundred and fifty on the red one!” “You guys, cut it out.”

· Lloyd’ s voice. ^^. – Keith and JJ thought he was talking to them and turned around. But Lloyd slipped past them.

He approached the fighting Vantours.

“Well, well, how kind of you,” he says. ^^^^ ·

“Now our bet’ s gone to waste.”

JJ says, J

Immediately, Sakata spoke up. J: “Nope. I’ m betting two hundred on the captain!” Keith and JJ exchanged glances. “You play it safe, don’ t you, young master?” “You’ re absolutely right.”

They shared a wry smile and watched the fight unfold. “Cut it out, you two!” ; J · · , ·: Lloyd’ s Vantzer stepped between the two machines. Both were fired up. < “Anyone not involved, back off.” Silver’ s Vantzer threw a punch at Lloyd. He caught it with his palm.

″Don't get in the way.″

Now it’ s Red’ s turn to punch.

As soon as Lloyd stepped back, the two machines immediately started trading blows. : : 22'12 Red’ s punch landed, and Silver fell. ” “Yes! Finish him off with that!”

Keith screams.

Red swings his right leg up, intending to stomp on him. Just before he brings it down, his right leg is destroyed. 22. ■ Losing his balance, he falls.

Silver I stands up. : –12 ″–1″ ″· 1–.–″ He tries to stomp on

the other side. Ni丶 But before he can, his leg gets blown off again, and he lands on his butt. Right in the middle of the two fallen machines. -- There stood Lloyd, holding his Twigge Rifle.

"The fight is over."

The gathered crowd began to disperse. 1

"Damn it. I missed out on a profit."

Keith clutched his head.

"That' s my line."

JJ looks frustrated too.

"And so, ″

Sakata smiled broadly and held out his hand to the two of them.

The two men who had been fighting got off the van and were now facing each other on the street, with Lloyd sandwiched between them. Both were white men with blond hair, appearing to be in their mid-thirties. : 1-More.^^ > The other man was slightly younger. He had olive-toned skin and shoulder-length hair. ', ' He had a distinctive, chiseled face. He seemed to have Aboriginal Australian heritage.

Although they were glaring at each other, they had regained their composure to a large extent. "What caused the fight?"

Lloyd asked the blond man, who appeared to be the older of the two.

"Sorry for the trouble. I' m Bobby Hopkins."

■The man bowed his head. '^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Pointing to the younger man,

"This is my partner, Porunga. He sometimes says things that

don’ t make any sense and gets violent—”  “It makes perfect sense!”

Porunga shouted... looking as if he was about to lunge at him again. 1, 2, 3, Lloyd hurriedly held him back.

″At this rate

Bobby said. –,″

Porunga, still looking agitated,

“I just want to protect this island’ s nature. That’ s why I volunteered for the militia—to end the war quickly!

But it seems like neither the OCU nor the USN wants to end the war! I’ m really pissed off about that!”

he added, his words stumbling.

“Do you like this island?” ■- Dido asks. “Luni”

Porunga nodded.

″The nature of this island is our treasure. Our Australian land has been polluted. It can never go back to the way it was. But it’ s not too late for this island.

I don’ t want this island to go the same way as my homeland, Australia. That’ s why, that’ s why…”

Tears welled up in his eyes

Porunga looked at Bobby.

“Bobby. You must know how I really feel. Right?!”

“But with just our strength alone…” Bobby trailed off. He grimaced as if he’ d just swallowed something bitter. “I’ ll fight. Even if I’ m alone, I won’ t give up!” Flash—.

Frederick was pointing his camera at Porunga.

“Stop it. Let’ s go!”

Lloyd wrapped his arm around Frederic’ s shoulder.

He urged him on forcefully and started walking.

Porunga’ s screams did not cease.

"I'll protect this island. I'll fight to the death for it! I'll fight... Ts !" The scream pierced Lloyd and the others’ backs.

The expressions of the Canyon Crow members were stiff. ;:ヽ;';・ Even the sarcastic Keith and JJ had solemn looks on their faces. It was as if Porunga’ s screams were voicing something within them. Frederick finally noticed the change in them.

"I'm sorry, I just ” Frederick apologized to Lloyd. He put away his camera and left the scene with the members of Canyon Crow.

# Chapter 13

Lloyd and the others headed for the military office in Freedom City.

They had been summoned.

They opened the door to the room they had been shown to.

"Eek!"

A scream came from inside. Inside the room, a fat man was staring at them with a terrified expression.

Relieved

"Captain Lloyd!"

"Pewee. It' s Pewee, isn' t it!"

Lloyd couldn' t help but shout. ?

"W-What did you say  !"

Sakata, who had been standing behind him, hurriedly burst into the room.

Seeing the fat man, he said, "Pi-ui-ri"

"Sa, Saka-yan. Saka-yan!"

Sakata and the fat man embraced each other. ; '; The man was a private in the Piwi L OCU Army.

A coward of the highest order. A glutton. But his driving skills were exceptional. That' s why he was working as a supply truck driver in Lloyd' s unit.

Even a year ago, during that Larcas incident...

"Saka-yan, I missed you so much, I missed you so much."

Piwi clung to Sakata, tears streaming down his face.

"Piwi, haven't you gained weight again?"

"Come on, Saka-yan. Don't bring that up during this emotional reunion. Ah, Saka-yan, Saka-yan !"

After crying for a while,

"Captain! Captain Lloyd !″

she cried, throwing her arms around Lloyd.

Sure enough, she had a good cry.

"Everyone, please take your seats."

It was Olson. *: .

"Colonel, were you here?"

Natalie said.

Olson looked at Natalie meaningfully and said,

"It's not just me. General Blakewood has just arrived as well."

"What?!"

Natalie gasped.

"Wow, I suppose it's an 'honor' to meet the general, isn't it?"

Keith sat down in the chair at the far end of the table.

"Maybe I'll ask him for a raise right then and there." JJ sat down next to Keith. Everyone took a seat as they pleased. "Pewee, sit down." Sakata sat Pewee, who was clinging to Lloyd, down next to him. The sound of footsteps. A man with a straight back entered the room. In an instant, the room fell silent. , ■-: :■■ He was probably around fifty years old:: He wore a crisp military uniform. A red beard framed his

mouth: Olson spoke up.

“General, these are the members of ‘Canyon Crow.’ ” The general scanned the room with a stern gaze. After a moment, he spoke slowly. “Since there seem to be some here meeting me for the first time, let me introduce myself. I am Willas Blakewood, the commander-in-chief of your unit.” “He looks like a nice middle-aged guy, huh?”

Keith whispered.

“You’ re way more of a stud than he is,”

JJ muttered. ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ “Cut it out. I’ m not the least bit flattered when you say that.” Blakewood shot Keith a glance.

Keith clamped his mouth shut. ニこ :’◆’ Slowly, he looked around at everyone,

“I hear all about your exploits from Colonel Olson all the time,” he said, fixing his gaze on Lloyd with a hint of sarcasm before continuing. “Well then. Thanks in part to you lot, our OCU forces have successfully recaptured every single city that had been seized by the USN. There are now only three cities still occupied by the enemy: Solait, Fort Monas, and Lupidis. “And just a moment ago, we received a report that Solait is on the verge of being recaptured.” “Whoa, that’ s gonna cut into our earnings,” Keith whistled. The general glared at him again. Keith spread his hands wide and apologized with a “Sorry…”

“You will all be called into action very soon. But in preparation for the decisive battle, you may rest for a while.”

“Rest is fine, but give us some money too, General,” Olson

snapped.

JJ, without a hint of guilt, :^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ “Unlike us or the regular army, we don’ t have anything as thoughtful as a rest allowance, you know.” The general responded, “I see. While you’ re staying here, I’ ll provide a thousand Hafmandor per person.” 11 ‘ “Hurrah, General Breakwood!” :. Keith and JJ cheered in unison. : Olson looked at the two of them with a bitter expression. But he didn’ t complain... ■·: “All right, dismissed.” ~ “Haaah. I guess I’ ll head to the arena and earn some interest on those thousand Hafmandors,” Keith stood up and yawned widely.

“I’ m in.”

JJ also got to his feet.

“That ″

■Pui-raised his hand.

″What should I do?″

Seeing that, Olson,

″Oh, that's right. This is Pee-wee Richberg Jr. From now on, he'll be traveling with you guys as the supply truck driver.″

He introduced him. ^^

″What? Pee-wee is a regular army soldier, isn't he? ♦

Sakata asked.″;;

Olson grimaced and explained.

″This guy chickened out and tried to desert during the last battle.″

″Pewee, is that true?″ :’

“Saka-yan, I’ m so embarrassed,” Nipe ■

“I managed to talk my way out of a court-martial by

bringing him into this unit."

"Is this guy really okay?"

Keith approaches Pee-wee.

He pokes Pee-wee' s puffed-out cheeks with his finger. :

"They' re all squishy, like a balloon."

JJ laughs. · ■ ■

Pewee just looks down, his face on the verge of tears.

"Don't worry. Pwee's driving skills are top-notch. Right, Captain?" Sakata looked at Lloyd.

He said. ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^,

"Captain Lloyd, Sakayan!"

Pewee let out a cry of delight. Tears were already welling up in his eyes.

"Well, having a supply truck around makes things a lot easier. Count on you, Fatso." ■ Kiss held out his hand*.;l.
ニ

"Hehe. Nice to meet you."

Pewee shook his hand back. , ここ1■

"Ouch! Let go of me~!"

he cried.

"Keith!"

Natalie gets angry.

"I was just kidding..."

Keith let go and walked out of the room. ■■

"Don' t let it happen that you run away just when I' m trying to restock." He bent down and poked Piu' s stomach

with his elbow.

“Uh, yeah. I’ ll do my best.”

“I’ m Natalie. Nice to meet you.”

Natalie held out her hand. 4ニー-— “Hehe. Nice to meet you too.”

″Pewee wiped his hand on his clothes and held out his right hand.″ As soon as he took Natalie's hand, his pale cheeks flushed pink. ″Come on, Pewee. Let's go have a drink to celebrate our reunion,″

Sakata said.

“Hmph! But I prefer food over drinks. Things like fried food, pizza, hamburgers,  Tempura sounds good, too!″

″This guy hasn’ t changed a bit.″ ■

Sakata laughed.

Pewee licked his lips and said,

“How about you, Captain? Fancy some rich, fried food with me?”

“I’ m in.”

With Pee-wee around, the atmosphere naturally lightens up.

“Well then, let’ s go!”

Sakata urged Lloyd on and left the room.

“Oh, Saka-yan, wait a sec… Um… if you don’ t mind, would you like to come with us?” Piuwi fidgeted as he invited Natalie.

″Eh, eh, I'd love to.″

Natalie nods. ⊥: 1'

″Yay! Let's go with Parts today.″

″Natalie,″

Olson called out to her. J ’ · ;’’–’

“What’ s up?”

″The General says he wants to talk to you. Please stay.″

Natalie’ s smile faded.

With a solemn expression, -

“All right ″

“Well then, come by later. Once we’ ve decided on a restaurant, I’ ll leave a message at the office.” “Yes, thank you.”

Natalie nodded.

“I’ ll be waiting, so be sure to come by.”

Pewee smiled happily and closed the door.

The room fell silent instantly. ’ ニ . –· ■>: “Colonel Olson. I’ m sorry, but you’ ll have to step out too.” 1 : – –■ Blakewood said:r

″Very well.″

Olson saluted and left the room. · ; –: General Blakewood and Natalie were left alone.

″It's been a while.″ ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Breakwood said.

His voice was soft. He sounded like a completely different person from the tense tone he’ d had just moments ago. The harshness had vanished from his eyes as well. His gaze was warm.

Natalie, however, was the opposite.

She seemed even more nervous than before.

″What do you want? I’ m busy, so please make it quick.″ She

spoke with the politeness and restraint befitting a superior officer. ■ ″Natalie... please don’ t speak to me like that.″ He said, appealing to her compassion. – Even so, Natalie’ s attitude and voice remained stiff. ″If you’ re telling me to leave the unit, I refuse,″ she declared. · ″You’ re stubborn.″

A faint smile slipped across Breakwood’ s lips. As if infected by it, a smile returned to Natalie’ s cheeks as well. “That’ s right. I was trained in a mercenary unit, after all.” “Since it’ s a reckless mercenary unit, I’ m worried about…” “It’ ll be fine. Your daughter won’ t die that easily, Father.” Natalie’ s expression had softened. She smiled with a gentleness she had never shown in public.

“Natalie. But you don’ t just fight as the deputy commander of a mercenary unit; you have another, even harsher duty—”
“General!”

Natalie shouted. The sternness had returned to her face. ″A-Aye.″ She brought her feet together and straightened her back. Saluting, she glared at Blakewood with a fierce gaze. ″Natalie Blakewood, returning to duty.″ She spun around and turned her back.

With measured steps, she left the room. —;—^^

# Chapter 14

"Are you still eating?"

Yan said, sounding exasperated.

"Don' t say that. Eating is my only joy in life." Looking a bit embarrassed, Puii reached for the last crumb on the table, even as he hung his head.

There was a restaurant in Freedom City

Lloyd, Sakata, and Pee-wee came out of the military office.

Yang, who had been waiting outside, joined them. Natalie arrived late. Keith and JJ headed to the arena. Frederick was nowhere to be seen. Since Pui had eaten the last slice of pizza, all the plates on the table were empty. "It' s all gone. Waiter, bring us some more fried shrimp and fried chicken. And a large Coke, too!"

Pewee placed the additional order. :T1 T

"H-h-hey, you! You've eaten two pizzas, five hamburgers, and two bowls of tempura rice all by yourself!" "Cut it out, Yan. This guy's stomach is bottomless," Sakata said.

"I just can't believe it."

Yan buried his face in his hands. Meanwhile, Lloyd and Natalie exchanged glances and smiled wryly. "Yan. You were here? We looked everywhere for you."

A voice–. It was Hans.

“Hans! What’ s wrong? You sound panicked.”

“Things have gone south. I was trying to find out about Karen, so I hacked into the military’ s computer—but I got caught by their trace. Now the military’ s after me.” … Hans said, staring at Lloyd.

“Hey, I’ m begging you. Let me join your unit.”

“My unit is still part of the military.”

“But you’ re a mercenary unit. It’ s safer than running around aimlessly.”  “You know what they say: ‘To hide a tree, hide it in the forest. To hide a pebble, hide it in the gravel.’ Oh, thanks a million!”

Hans took the Coke the boy had brought him, cleared his throat, and drank it.

″Hey, that’ s my Coke!″

Piuui snatched the Coke away with an angry look on his face.

″Come on, my throat is parched.″

″No way. Order your own.″

Hiui clutches the Coke tightly with both hands.

″What's with you, you cheapskate fatso?″

“Hans. So, what about the info on Karen?”

Lloyd asked. ■ ·

″No luck. Their security is off the charts. We traced it to a military research facility called the Nirvana Institute.″ ″The Nirvana Institute? What’ s that?″ 1go.::;'';¥1 Hans spread his arms wide,

“I don’ t even know what that research facility is.”

“More importantly, you’ ll let me join the unit, right?”

“But…”

“I’ ll be way more useful than this fatso. I’ ll keep investigating Karen, too.”

“What’ s with you? We just met, and you’ re already taking my Coke and calling me fat.” Piu-i pouted. Sakata tried to comfort her.

“Hey, Lloyd. I’ m asking you, too. Let him join.”

Yan clasped her hands together.

“Just because we’ re a mercenary unit doesn’ t mean you can just go around ″

Natalie said.

Lloyd stopped her and said,

“Hans is a pro at intelligence. It’ ll definitely be a plus.”

“Thanks! I’ ll remember this,”

·Hans broke into a childlike smile befitting his age.” , 2;” But immediately, his face clouded over,

″Come to think of it, isn't this guy a member of this unit?″ he said, pulling out a photo. J-Nii ヽ1,’ — it was a Polaroid.Keith was in it. · “· So, ‘I took this on the way here, in front of the arena, but I got hassled by a big, scary-looking guy, and it felt kind of dangerous…’ ”
“Wasn’ t JJ with you?” · “No, he was alone.” · · · · “So he wasn’ t on the Van Tour either.”

“Yeah.”

“This is bad!”

Lloyd stood up

“Just leave him alone. That hothead.”

Yan said. 1

Lloyd, his face pale with anger, rushed out.

That day, Keith and JJ were polar opposites in the arena.

JJ’ s bets were winning one after another. ■ On the other hand, Keith’ s bets were all losing. · “Damn it, this is no fun. I’ m going to take a piss.” Keith headed to the restroom alone. It was partly because he’ d been drinking, of course, but he was also venting his frustration over losing. “This is a fixed match. How the hell is that good-for-nothing Gregorio keep winning? If he got hit by my hand rod, he’ d be dead in a heartbeat.” He kept grumbling in the restroom. “· “二’ “Oh? You think you could beat that Gregorio, then?” asked the big man standing next to him. “You bet. If we fought fair and square, he wouldn’ t last a second…”

Keith’ s body floated into the air. The big man had grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and lifted him up.

“W-what are you doing? Let go!” ’ : “:

“So you really won’ t last a second? Let’ s put that to the test.”

“W-what did you say?” ■

“I’ m Gregorio Maias. Around here, they call me ‘Kong,’ ” said the giant man. Penny Keith’ s face turned pale. She quickly hid it and said, “All right. Let’ s get on the Van Tour right away…”

“No, bare hands will do.” The

Gregorio stepped outside, still holding Keith up with one hand.

He tossed Keith onto the street.

Keith landed on his back and winced. A moment—

″Damn it. There’ s a Van Tour right over there. W-wait for

me.″ Keith backed away.

“No way. I can’t stand being made fun of, not even a little bit.” He suddenly kicked out with his right foot.

It slammed into Keith’s side.

The blow left Keith unable to move.

“It’s too early to go to sleep yet.”

Gregorio grabbed Keith by the collar with his left hand and dragged him to his feet.

With his right hand, he slapped Keith back and forth across the face.

“No, stop it. Stop it!!!” ヽ ■ Keith didn’t fight back at all. No, he couldn’t. ·■ヽ · “What happened to all that big talk from earlier? Huh? (17) G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-1’ “You’re a total idiot for making Gregorio angry.” ; “■Ko :.: “Yeah. ‘Kong’ is strong even when he’s on the Van Tour, but he’s even stronger when he gets off.” I heard a voice from the onlookers:–” ” “W-wait, I’m sorry. I’ll apologize. I’ll give you money, so please forgive me.” Keith bowed his head. “No way. I’ll make an example of you to show what happens when you cross me.” Gregorio raised his right fist.

Aiming for Keith’s face.

He let out a growl and slammed it in.

Gregorio’s right arm froze. His face contorted.

His right arm, as thick as a tree trunk, was being twisted up behind his back. It was Lloyd.

"You think you can get away with doing this to me?" Gregorio growled, foam flying from his mouth as he raged.
"I' ll deal with you. Let that man go. If you don' t…" Lloyd' s voice was heavy with intensity.

A bear-like scream escaped Gregorio' s mouth. He released his left hand. Keith fell. Keith crawled away on his stomach. 11:22:1: Lloyd let go of Gregorio' s arm. -

They faced each other.

"Kid. What' s your name?"

"Lloyd."

He said it calmly.

Gregorio' s face, like that of a guardian deity, twisted into a smirk.

"Lloyd, huh? Go to hell."

With a speed that belied his massive frame, he charged forward. .: Lloyd didn' t move. He stood with his hands down, completely unguarded. Just as Gregorio was about to ram into him.

He crouched down smoothly.

The next moment, Gregorio collapsed forward like a fallen tree. Lloyd had tripped him.

He immediately straddled him.

wrapping his legs around Gregorio' s torso to pin him down. He wrapped both arms around his neck and tightened his grip.
"Gggggrrr…"

Gregorio couldn' t even move.

"If you admit defeat, hit the ground."-'Nii'-

Lloyd said. - 1’ Gregorio was holding on, even as he foamed at the mouth.

Blood mixed with the foam.

Yet he still held on.

Lloyd put even more strength into his arms.

His thick neck bent at nearly a right angle.

″Guh, guh-guh, guh-guh-guh...″

Gregorio’ s right hand fell limply to the ground. 1 Lloyd relaxed his grip.

Gregorio collapsed, face down. ■ Lloyd stood up. Not a single drop of sweat on him.

“I’ ve… lost for the first time…”

Gregorio groaned. Hmph; , “L Lloyd What’ s ?″

″Lloyd Clive.″

“...Lloyd Clive, huh... That’ s quite a name.” Gregorio looked up at Lloyd and smiled. Still smiling, he fainted. Lloyd looked around.

The crowd of onlookers scattered in a panic. Keith was crouched in the darkness of the street.

“Are you okay?”

Lloyd reached out his hand.

“Did you know?”

Keith asked, still crouched on the ground.

・ Lloyd admitted it^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

″I could tell by looking at your muscles. Your muscles are only good for operating machines. They aren’ t built for hand-to-hand combat.″

Keith fell silent. 1 Ni-″: ■ Lloyd waited, his hand still outstretched.

・ Eventually. 4・' ″Ever since I was little, I've had absolutely no strength. I was always bullied. Even now, I'm scared. I'm scared unless I'm in the Van Tour.

That' s why I just drink all the time.

But as long as I' m in the Van Tour, I won' t lose. That' s why I' m taking my revenge, little by little, in the Van Tour."

Keith looked up, his face flushed.

As if he' d forgotten the pain in his body, he stood up.

"Don' t tell anyone. About this, to no one…"

He looked at Lloyd with pleading eyes. Lloyd nodded.

"I promise. I didn' t see a thing." "Ah, thank you, Captain Lloyd…"

For the first time, Keith addressed Lloyd as "Captain."

"Let' s grab a bite to eat together."

Lloyd urged Keith. ~ "JJ' s inside . Anyway, he' s been unlucky all day. He' ll be glad to have that jinx out of the way."

Keith grinned. He walked alongside Lloyd. He didn' t notice it at first. ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ After the two had left.

a man emerged from behind a corner.

The man had witnessed the entire incident that had occurred on the street as he happened to be passing by.

It was Frederick.

His eyes were glistening with tears. ・・He didn' t even know himself why he was crying.

But they were strangely hot tears.

Frederick watched Lloyd and Keith walk away in silence.

# Chapter 15

Extreme tension reigned over the grasslands in the dark of night. 7 ;' ″ ″ Lights scattered ahead.

.Those are lights from a USN military facility. 1. We hide the Vanzers beneath the grass and trees and watch the situation. We received orders from Olson after sunset.

"We have received a distress signal from a soldier who has deserted a USN military facility near Fort Monas. Proceed to the location immediately and secure this deserter. Note that this may be an enemy ploy, so exercise extreme caution."

He wasn't even sure if it was true.

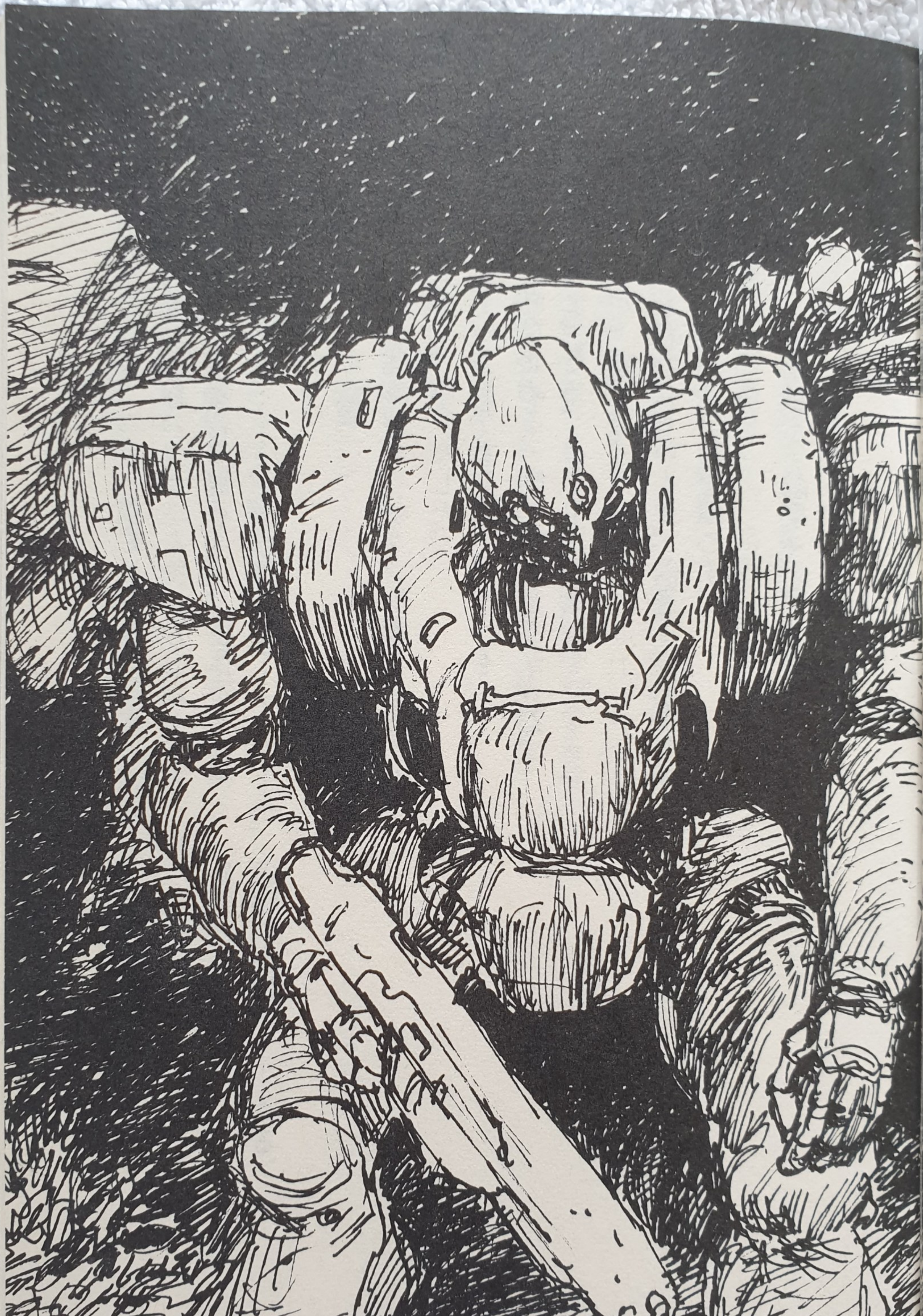
■It was exactly the kind of job suited for a mercenary unit.■ "But the pay is high… 0- · It was past midnight.}. ";" ".−.

"W-what is it, Hans?"

Sakata asked.

Hans carefully operated the radio. He was intercepting USN military communications. "No mistake 0. Those guys seem to be desperately chasing the deserter. Confirmation messages are flying back and forth." "Can't you make contact with the deserter?" Lloyd asked. "One." :-': , one:; · "We can, but the enemy will spot us too." "Isn't that fine? We're going to get found sooner or later anyway. Just sitting here doing nothing is making my hands itch like crazy." [ "◆·" "ニ..''" "·ニ" "一ニニ" "Same as above" " .■;■■" TJTJ is in charge★Wind^Ox

″Alright. Hans. Open a channel.″



″Roger. Hey, this is the OCU Military Mercenary Unit. Unidentified craft, respond.″ Hans said as he turned the radio knob. ″M; ——-″ Amidst the static-filled static, a response came from the unidentified craft... ″This is... SN:
Barna Engine Corps . We' re sending reinforcements .″
″T-that voice!

He jumped out of the bushes where he had been hiding. Gine: A single unit dashed out:—.

"Hey, Yang. What are you planning to do? Hey!" JJ called out to stop him. He tried to listen but couldn' t. "He' s gone. What do we do, Captain?" Keith said. "L-Ni." "All right. We' re going too. Forward!" All the aircraft rose simultaneously.

They give chase after Yang.

Ahead, a light moves. It' s an enemy Vanzar: two of them.
"Yan. Come back. It' s dangerous to rush ahead,"

Natalie called out.

But Yang is desperately calling over the radio.

″Unidentified craft. Respond. Respond!″

″Yan. You're being targeted. It's dangerous.″ A missile exploded right in front of Yan's Vanzar. Yan made no attempt to take cover.

"Yan, he' s deliberately making himself a target!" "He' s trying to divert the enemy' s attention away from the unidentified craft." "What are you doing? You' re going to get hit, Yan!" Sakata shouted. - Even so, Yan stood his ground and continued transmitting.

"Unidentified craft, respond… Eihin. It' s you, isn' t it, Eihin?" "What?!"

A wave of surprise sweeps through the Canyon Crow. '; .

″It's me. It's Meihua! Answer me, Eihin.″

〈Hey, sis ,7 -〉

“It really is Eihin! Thank goodness, you're alive ”

・Yang's voice choked with tears. J^^l- ,^| ‘ - ・ ・; 1 ・ Ee-hin, who had been hiding, rushed over to Yang's Vuantsa.1^,— “Yang. Join the battle lines. The enemy is closing in.” ::: ‘Natalie’ shouts the order. L “Roger. Ee-hin, you stay hidden here.”

“But-”

“Just shut up and stay put!”

“Got it.” B Yang concealed Ee-hin's Vantour.

・Instantly, she transformed into a fighting panther. - Crawling through the darkness, she closed in on the enemy. And destroyed them. - - , The enemy's radio transmission was broadcast to all Canyon Crows. ・ ・ “Headquarters. It appears the deserters have joined forces with the OCU army. Please issue orders.” “As for orders,”

・A cold tone. A familiar

“That's Driscoll Where is he? Where is Driscoll? 17 Goroid shouted.

“The enemy's orders aren't coming from the base right in front of us, but via radio from the Lupidis sector,” Hans reported.

“Damn it, so only one of them is in the safe zone.”

Lloyd clenched his fist.

It seemed Driscoll couldn't hear Lloyd's voice. He was sneering at his subordinates with a look of contempt, thinking, “To be asking for orders at a time like this-I

must have some truly naive subordinates."

"But…"

Ignoring his subordinate' s words, Driscoll spoke calmly yet menacingly, "Take care of both of them."

But.

"Roger that ″Whoa!″

The voice of the subordinate receiving the order cut off mid-sentence. ;'」

Keith' s shout drowned it out.

″Hmph, Canyon Crow has arrived.″

"Don' t try to look cool—we' ve already wiped them all out over here."

JJ' s voice was full of excitement.

Driscoll' s order came over the radio.

″All Vantours remaining at the base, launch immediately.″ .^^^^. His subordinates responded in panicked voices.

"No, it' s no good. The base has been destroyed. We' re almost out of supplies. Order a retreat!" Driscoll let out a sigh , then said, "Fight. If you run, you' ll be executed."

″N-no way , w-w-wait!〉

Explosions and flashes of light engulf the USN facility:—" . The Van Tour of Canyon Crow rampages through the flames. As if enjoying a carnival. Enjoying the slaughter. No· "It' s… hell…:· Frederick stared at the battle, speechless. One——;—· " The relentless fighting continued. The merciless attacks.〉■■ェ ♦■一二 In less than ten minutes, the battle was over.

Flames rose and flickered. As if to linger on the afterglow of the battle. The moon shone from the sky, and the chirping of insects echoed from somewhere. ; “Hans, where are the enemies?”

Lloyd asked.

“Hold on a sec. Let me check.” After a moment, Hans said, “No response from the enemy unit. Wiped out!”

″Yaa-hooo!″

Keith let out a wild cry. ■G''''M · 〈We’ ve taken care of the scum. I should thank the OCU elite…〉' There was not a trace of mourning for his subordinates’ deaths in that voice. .*.. “You let your men die! Can you even call yourself a superior officer?!” Lloyd shouted.

〈……Hahaha, humans are divided into mediocrities and geniuses, and geniuses are permitted to transcend all norms 〉

“W-What did you say Driscoll. Driscoll!”

“It’ s no use, Lloyd. Because of the radio signal, our voices shouldn’ t be reaching them over there. Besides, his radio’ s already cut off,”

Hans explained.

“Captain. The deserter has been safely apprehended. All eliminated. Mission complete.” .:.. ; . ; “

・Natalie reports. ^^1

Suppressing his irritation, Lloyd shouted.

″Return!″ ■

# Chapter 16

The OCU military office in Freedom City.

The members of Canyon Crow had returned from battle. *1, Frederick, Hans, and the siblings Jan and Eihin were with them.

Of course, they aren’t official members.

·Since they participated in the battle, Olson requested that they accompany him. ■ Olson hasn’t shown up yet.

“Is that your brother?”

Frederick asked, looking at the boy sitting next to Yang.

He was tall but thin.

His cheeks were red, and his expression was still childlike. It would be more fitting to call him a boy

″Y-yes. Let me reintroduce him. This is my younger brother, Eihin.″

Yang said proudly.

Eihin just stood there blankly.

″Say hello!″ · · ·

Yang forcibly pushed his head down. “H-hello ”

Yi-hin mumbled, stumbling over his words.

“It feels more like an overprotective mom and a timid boy than a sister and brother,” Kiss said 0

Yan glared at Kiss. -I, ■ “True, she’s only seventeen. But since I’ve been teaching her how to pilot a Vantour since she was twelve, her skills are way beyond those of your average soldier.” “I-I went to the arena and taught myself…” “Huh! How many lessons did I teach you, exactly?”

″H-hmm　　″

Keith spread his arms wide and said,

“Yeah, yeah, I see. With such a talented little brother, I’ m sure you’ re very proud of him, big sis.”

“Hey, if you make fun of my brother, I won’ t stand for it.” She looked like she was about to pounce on him at any moment. ¥( “” ” ^^^^^^ “Hey, sis. Cut it out.” Eihin hurriedly grabbed Yang’ s arm to hold him back. Trying to lighten the mood, Lloyd asked, “But why were you in the USN?” “I was scouted by the USN.” “Scouted, you say?17 Frederick took out his notebook and prepared to take notes. “Yes. While I was fighting in the Solite Arena, they said I had potential as a Vantour pilot.”

″See? I told you 17. Gyan smiles smugly. .·:;.″ ″Eihin looks down, looking embarrassed. ’So, you underwent training with the Nirvana Agency, that special forces unit...’ ’The Nirvana Agency!’

Hans exclaims. ,

″Do you know about it?″

Pewee asks.

·I wonder when he found out. He’ s stuffing a cheeseburger into his mouth all by himself. ■ .1 “I told Lloyd this before, but it’ s a name I came across when I hacked into the military computers to track Karen’ s movements.” ;: “■’.■

“So, is Karen there?”

“In the USN’ s top-secret data, Ms. Karen is listed as a ‘candidate for transfer to the Nirvana Agency’ …”

“So she’ s there, then!?”

“But right after that, the hacking was discovered…”

Hans fell silent.

“Eihin. Was there a woman named Karen at the agency you were at?”

・ Lloyd asked. ../

“No. There weren’ t any women…” *1

“So, you ran away because you missed a woman?” ;- .

“Keith. Eihin is still just a child!”

Yang slammed her fist on the table.

“I wonder about that.”

Keith smirked and stroked his chin.

Yihin looked serious,」 -

“It’ s not because there weren’ t any women. My colleagues have been going missing one after another…” “Gone missing?” ¥ M “They just vanished out of the blue, and that was it. When I asked my superiors, they said, ‘They’ ve been reassigned,’ but I couldn’ t believe they’ d been reassigned while leaving all their belongings behind and taking only the clothes on their backs,” ■ “Plus, everyone who disappeared was just like me—guys who’ d been scouted. So, I got scared
L

″It′s all right, Eihin. You did the right thing running away from a place like that.″ ″What on earth is the USN up to?″ r■二、ゝ->ll 它;篷.:」 The furrow between Frederick′s eyebrows deepened even further. ; .^^^^^ ″But he′s effectively a prisoner of our forces. I wonder if he′ll be all right.″ ロ

Natalie said, ^○

The door leading to the back opened. Olson appeared.

Tension filled the air.

As soon as Olson caught sight of Eihin,

“So that’ s the deserter. Make arrangements to send him to the detention camp immediately.” Yang jumped to his feet.

“I won’ t hand Eihin over!”

He stepped in front of Eihin and braced himself.

At this sudden act of hostility, Olson raised his voice.

“Are you trying to defy me?!”

“I’ m not employed by you.”

"What did you say?"

“I’ ll protect my brother, even if it means killing you!”

Yang’ s eyes flashed sharply. It was the first time he’ d ever shown such a grim expression. Lloyd slowly rose to his feet.

He stepped between Yang and Olson.

He faced Olson and said,

“I’ ll take charge of Eihin with my unit.”

"Lloyd. You ”

Olson glared at Lloyd through his sunglasses.

“I don’ t care

Lloyd said emphatically, glaring back at Olson.

The tension was suffocating. Silence! .; ; m ‘ Gulp. Pwee’ s throat made a sound.: Ni· Olson, as if giving up, .

“Do as you please.”

Yang smiled and patted Ee-hin on the shoulder. ■ 1 -

“However” -

Olson shouted: :Ni

Staring at Lloyd,

“If Yag ever deserts your unit, kill him without hesitation. That’ s the condition.” 1■:◆ -’ The tension and silence swelled to more than double what it had been moments before.

As if to break through it, Lloyd said.

"Understood."

“That’ s all I have to say. Dismissed.”

Olson’ s footsteps echoed as he disappeared into the back room.

“Lloyd, thank you. I’ ll take full responsibility for managing Eihin. I won’ t cause you any trouble.” “I know.”

Lloyd gave a sly smile and walked out of the room. ■ “Count on me, partner!”

Keith and JJ patted Eihin on the shoulder and left the room.

“I’ m Natalie. I’ m the second-in-command of the ‘Canyon Crow.’ If anything comes up, don’ t hesitate to ask me for advice.” ■ Natalie smiled at Eihin and held out her right hand.

“Uh, nice to meet you. Pleased to meet you.”

Eihin shook her slender white hand.

“Their hands part, and Natalie walks away: .;:· Eihin stands there, dumbfounded.

“What are you blushing about?”

Yang asked, as if checking on him.

"I-I’ m not embarrassed or anything..."

“I’ m Pivi. If you’ d like, would you like to go grab a

bite to eat? I know a great place.” Before Eihin could answer, Frederick spoke up.

″Let's do that. Eihin, I'd like to ask you a few things.″

“Sure, I guess…”

“Lucky us. Frederic’ s treating us.” —Pewee cheered

“Hey, hey, wait a minute. I was going to ask Eihin about the USN…”

“But that’ s for a story. Just get a receipt and write it off as a business expense.” Pee-wee is usually a soft-hearted guy, but when food is involved, he’ s pretty hard to beat. ■ Even Frederic had no choice but to give in.

″All right. All right. I'll treat you.″

“Yay, it’ s settled! Come on, Eihin, let’ s go. What do you like?”

“Huh? If you ask me who I like out of the blue…” Eihin’ s cheeks turn red again.

″No, I don't mean a person. I mean food. For Western food, I like fried stuff, hamburgers, and pizza

. For Japanese food, tempura. For Chinese, sweet and sour pork or spring rolls deep-fried gyoza

are great, too.″

Pewee swallowed hard, put his arm around Eihin’ s shoulder, and walked out of the room.

Left behind, Yang rolled up her sleeves.

“I’ m drinking today, too!”

With a spring in her step, she followed after Pee-wee and the others.

# Chapter 17

Back in the command room, Olson let out a deep sigh and sank into his chair. He picked up a cigar from his desk and lit it.

“Newspaper reporters, hackers, deserters…: Just adding more troublemakers.” He put both feet up on the desk. Slowly, he puffed on his cigar. The phone rang. :■:',< He gazed blankly at the phone on the desk.

The light indicating an incoming call was on.

His expression hardened. ·

Normally, calls should come through the operator. It’ s rare for someone to call directly. He took his feet off the desk. He pressed the cigar into the ashtray.

With a nervous look on his face, he picked up the receiver: ; Ni’

〈Olson

A man’ s voice came from the other end of the line-丶 , a familiar voice, cold and eerily calm. Olson looked around the room, knowing full well that no one else was there. ; , , After confirming that no one else was there,』 : 1 ‘ “So it is you, after all.” 二

〈I hear my subordinate is at your place.〉

“I just met him.”

〈What do you plan to do?〉

“They say they’ ll be managing it at Canyon Crow.”

“Did you decide that?” J 1 “It was Lloyd.”

Silence. Then, a laugh that could be interpreted as either mockery or deception came from the other end of the line.

After a while.

″I see.″

he muttered^^.

“Don’t worry about it. If anything happens, I’ll issue an order to eliminate them.” ·;11 : A smile flitted across Olson’s face. –:.

It was a smile slightly different from the one he’d worn when facing the members of Canyon Kudo. A smile that seemed to seep up from the depths of his heart.

It carried a hint of cruelty.

However, the voice coming from the other end of the phone was even more merciless.

It spoke with razor-sharp precision and icy coldness.

“By the way, how are your ‘materials’ doing?” – Olson replied without hesitation.

“Didn’t you just see for yourself?”

He scored a point. Changing the smile on his face in that way, he added: “As you can see, they’re an excellent bunch. Isn’t this the time to worry about others?” he pressed.

Yet the voice on the phone remained completely unperturbed.

◆

On the contrary, he grew even more ruthless and said in a hushed voice: “I’ll be in touch.”

he said, and then unilaterally hung up the phone. “Damn it,” he muttered, “Nide-ni-1-hiro”-4 Olson slammed the receiver down. · He looked at his palm and grimaced.

Before he knew it, sweat was pouring down his face.

# Chapter 18

It was inside a bar called "Crystal" in the heart of Fort Monas. Frederick was sitting in a corner of the counter. He had barely touched his drink and was staring at his laptop. The OCU military had won every battle and had already taken control of most cities. All that remained in the hands of the USN military was the southeastern port city of Lupidis.

According to information I obtained from an OCU superior, the OCU is reportedly about to send a telegram to the USN Department of Defense in Washington, demanding the immediate disarmament and withdrawal of USN forces from Huffman Island. There are various reasons why the OCU forces—which were at a significant disadvantage in terms of troop and Vanzar numbers—managed to achieve a string of victories in such a short period of time, so it' s hard to pinpoint a single cause.

However, I am certain of one thing.

It is the performance of the mercenary unit ″Canyon Crow.″

If I had to describe them in a single word during combat, it would be "crazy." They kill their opponents without giving their lives a second thought, as if they were mere insects. While the methods of slaughter differ from person to person, the cruelty remains the same..；、 Although I volunteered to join the military, I have regretted it deep down more than once or twice because of the sheer brutality. 1 ・ メ During combat, there have been many times when I tried to help the enemy. I myself have tried to escape at every opportunity countless times. However, the reason I didn' t do so was the "journalist' s spirit" within me.

And there is one more thing… the issue of "family." ＊1-1：

It’ s easy to run away; if I were just a reporter, I might have turned tail and fled long ago.

But if I ran away from here, who would I be?

Running away from my divorce issues, running away from the battle right in front of me—isn’ t that ultimately just running away from myself? That’ s why I’ ve hidden my trembling legs and put on a brave front, even in front of the Canyon Crow crew. Before meeting them, before going into battle, I always had a drink of whiskey. I’ m ashamed to say, there were times I emptied a whole bottle in a single day. However, my drinking has been on the decline these past few weeks. / /; ''.产 Along with that, my thoughts about the members of Canyon Crow have also changed. · I’ ve come to realize that they aren’ t simply “crazy.” Lloyd, who searches for his ex-lover with two companions. · Keith, who fights while hiding his frail physique:

Even JJ, who seems like nothing more than a money-grubber, gives the impression that there must be some reason behind it when you see the bottomless sadness in his eyes when he’ s alone. As for his second-in-command, Natalie—though I haven’ t asked the Canyon Crow crew or her directly—she is General Blakewood’ s only daughter:’:■; So why is she in such an extremely dangerous mercenary unit? 1 If I were Blakewood, and Natalie were Naomi... ○

Well, when I think about it, it seems like there’ s something beyond my comprehension.

As for Sakata, although I have no proof, I’ m starting to grasp his astonishing background. If Sakata really is who I suspect, this would be a major scoop . Right now, I don’ t regret coming to this island.

On the contrary, I consider myself lucky to have been able to serve with Canyon Crow. Both as a reporter and as a human being.

That' s because I feel like I' m starting to glimpse—albeit faintly—the hidden side of war and the hidden side of humanity that I wouldn' t have seen if I hadn' t been with them.

The end of the war may be near. ; ″—L But. My work is just beginning. 12-2::1' - ' - I intend to devote all my energy to uncovering the conspiracy that Park risked his life to uncover—the trap set within this war.

"Sir. You' re quite enthusiastic. Are you from the media?" ; '- — —' The bartender' s voice brought Frederick back to his senses.

"I figured as much. Are you writing an article?"

"No, just jotting down some notes for my memory. ″More importantly, is there anything here that might make for a good story?″ Frederick asked as he closed his laptop. A bar is the perfect place to gather information. As if to prove it, the bartender pondered for a moment, then

Spirits of Huffman

"Oh, right. Do you know about 'The Spirit of Huffman,' sir?" Spirits of Huffman

" 'The Spirits of Huffman' … Never heard of them."

"It' s a terrorist group that operates around here."

"Terrorists, you say. Are they USN soldiers or something, bitter about the OCU military' s victory?" "Well, apparently not. They never target civilians. Rumor has it they only go after military forces—and attack both the OCU and USN forces indiscriminately." "Both sides,

indiscriminately?” –;” …, “I-it’ s a strange story, isn’ t it?” 1. ” “Yeah ”

・It certainly was a strange story.

But then.

A passage from Park’ s letter flashed through Frederick’ s mind.

″I made contact with an organization called S ・ H and learned a part of the scheme behind this war.″ That passage.

Could S ・ H be an abbreviation for Spirits of Huffman? Frederick stood up and leaned forward. “If you know anything else, tell me.” “Ah, ah ″

The bartender looked bewildered. ■.こ ; : :二 All eyes were fixed on the space behind Frederick. 一 ; : . : Frederick turned around.

Lloyd was standing there. ■ “Olson called me in.” Nee--く.■J’ “You went out of your way just to tell me that?” “I saw you when I walked by. The rest was on a whim.” Lloyd said only that, then turned his back. He started walking. He walked out of the bar.

“Thanks for the drink.”

Frederick pressed a ten-hafmandle note into the bartender’ s hand.

“Oh, this much…”

“Never mind. If you have any other information, let me know.” ヽ: “He waved off the bartender who was thanking him and hurried after Lloyd.”

# Chapter 19

“He’ s a civilian. I’ d like him to leave this room.” ■ Seeing Frederick, who had accompanied Lloyd to the military office, Olson said. The other members were already gathered. I/<1;乁<>-,エ; 「 二: “As long as he’ s under my command, just like the other members, it’ s only natural that he’ s here.” :’; Lloyd stared at Olson and said. They glared at each other.

Lloyd wouldn’ t back down. After about five seconds, Olson relented. With a wry smile, he began to speak. “The USN’ s surrender is imminent. Before we pursue the scattered enemy forces, I’ d like you to take on a temporary assignment.”

“As long as I get paid, I’ ll take on anything.”

“Reiji Sakata, the chairman of Sakata Industries, is coming to Fort Monas to inspect the factory. I want you to greet him.” Frederick stole a glance at Sakata’ s face.

His expression was stiff. So stiff it could be called abnormal.”

“But speaking of Sakata Industries, isn’ t it true that they supply weapons not only to the OCU but also to the USN?”

Keith said. As if to prove it, Eihin added,

“Yes. All the Vantours we were made to use were from Sakata Industries. Mind you, they broke down so often that there were constant complaints like, ‘Aren’ t we being made to use prototypes?’ ” L1 或-%^ “In that case, there’ s no need to worry about the OCU or the USN attacking us. We might see a protest movement from consumers who got stuck with defective products, though.”

"I don' t think there' s any room for us to get involved, is there?"

"True."

Yan agreed with Keith' s words. In response, Olson explained. "There are rumors that a terrorist group calling itself 'Hafman' s Soul' has been appearing in this area. It' s a violent, armed gang." ..· "Terrorists, huh? You should' ve just said so from the start." "Well, whether it' s the USN or terrorists, they' re still a cash cow." Ignoring Olson, Keith and JJ got up on their own. The other members followed suit. *

As if to remind everyone that he was the commander, Olson shouted, "Everyone, report immediately to the temporary base on the outskirts of Fort Monas." ^ It wasn' t quite dawn yet. 2—": ·Niny; ·.F-212■◆2; 1 The eastern sky had just begun to shift from pitch black to purple. 211 . Here and there in the sky, stars shone as if displaying their final glow. On the outskirts of Fort Monas.

A temporary helipad set up on the gentle grasslands casts its shadow. The members of Canyon Crow are waiting, having hidden their Van Tours under bushes and grass.

Conversation is strictly forbidden until there is movement. Everyone remains silent, listening intently to their radios. If a transmission comes in, Hans will pick it up. He is supposed to relay it to all units immediately. They have been waiting like this for nearly two hours now. It' s about time the helicopter arrived. Just then, the silence was broken.

"This is SI-1. We' ll be arriving shortly." It sounded like a transmission from the helicopter pilot. ---..-':-」 ':=」 -^ Immediately, another voice came over the radio. 0) .

1 “I’ ve found them. Sakata is on that helicopter. Commence attack!” . .— ・ ‘A Light dots indicating non-allies appeared on the radars of each Vantour.—^||,:1 Their number: fourteen. ■・ - i There was no longer any need to remain silent. ‘“Two “Unidentified Vantours detected! Two

Natalie shouted.

“USN?” Keith asked.

“No, I don’ t think so. Their movements lack coordination,” JJ said, staring at the dots.

″Hmm, then... terrorists?″

Pewee’ s voice trembled. “Two—1·” .F – “One” :.. At that very moment, one of the enemy craft fired. “Ni:–, ¥ ,’. ’ Streaks of fire flew like fireworks and burst in the dim sky.” :· .1,” 1 · A huge fireball bloomed in the sky.-- : : 1 The missile launcher! A direct hit on the helicopter. ■ The helicopter lost its balance dramatically. However, it wasn’ t shot down. “Engage. Take out the enemy missile operator first.” Lloyd issued the order. : ” ; I, Canyon Crow sprang into action.1. ヽ – Soaring through the sky, crawling across the ground. ■1 1 1 Sakata’ s movements were several notches faster than usual. He was the first to rush toward the missile launcher and mercilessly destroy it 0 :.;ニ–″ “Hmph, Sakata, you’ re on fire.”

″Let me have a turn, too.″

Just as Keith and JJ muttered that, Sakata was already charging toward another Missiler.



It was about a minute later that they intercepted the enemy’ s panicked radio transmission. <Captain. It’ s an ambush. All four of our Missilers have been taken out!> . <Damn it, the operation has failed. Full retreat. I’ m jettisoning my craft and breaking off too.> “Wait, don’ t run!” E · Sakata shouted. “2’ ‘’’.*” ″ But the terrorists’ actions were lightning-fast.

He immediately broke away from the Van Tour. He vanished into the darkness of the night: .·1;″;: Sakata stared wide-eyed at the laser.

But he couldn’ t spot a single light that might indicate an enemy. 1 – “” ; “Hans, where’ s the enemy?” 3- ( “I give up! Once they’ ve ditched the Van Tour and their weapons and made a clean getaway, it’ s harder than looking for a mouse in the dark!

_i/¥″That’ s it.″

Sakata muttered the parting shot with a look of frustration. That was a rare occurrence.

“You were really fired up,”

JJ says to Sakata.

“Do you have a grudge against terrorists or something?”

Even Yan asked in a serious tone.

Sakata looked up at the sky in silence.

The helicopter managed to descend safely. It was attempting to land on a temporary helipad. The sun, emerging from the eastern sky, cast its light upon the damaged airframe.

# Chapter 20

Surrounded by heavily armed bodyguards, a middle-aged man stepped off the helicopter. Hmph:■· His thinning, graying hair was tied back in a single ponytail. The wrinkles on his face were deep. What caught the eye was the sharpness of his gaze.

His eyes, at least, haven’t aged a bit.

They still held a diamond-like brilliance.

His upright posture was perfectly complemented by a custom-made EC suit.

Reiji Sakata^-. The founder of Sakata Industries. ″It all started with a tiny Japanese pharmaceutical company he inherited from his father. . : 二''＊ When Reiji became president, he embarked on a strategy of diversified operations. In a single generation, he propelled the company into the world’s top ten

He built it into a major corporation that made the list.

■ He has since handed over the presidency to his son, Koichi, and stepped down to become chairman.— Ichiro. However, there was not the slightest sign that he was growing old. ■ ■ ■— Penny, flanked by bodyguards, descended the metal stairs beside the helipad... She boarded the elevator positioned directly in front of her. An employee who had been waiting inside bowed deeply to greet Reiji.^^^^^^^^^; The elevator continued to descend rapidly, as if plummeting to the very depths of the earth. [Just as the pressure in his ears became intense and a ringing sound echoed, it stopped.＊ゝこ—〇^ The doors opened. . ‘:　“Ni/:Pee-mai” Reiji stepped out of the elevator with a calm demeanor. ‘Go A corridor lined with metal frames stretched out before him.

It was the underground factory of Sakata Industries, built on the outskirts of Fort Monas. “We’ ve been waiting for you, Chairman.”

A man standing beside the elevator spoke up.

・He was probably in his early thirties. ・Even through his loose-fitting suit, his thinness was almost sickly. His sharp nose and narrow eyes gave off a nervous aura.

“You’ re here, Koichi?”

He was Reiji’ s eldest son and the current president of Sakata Industries.

Five years ago, he had taken the helm as president while still in his twenties.

He shifted the company’ s main business to the weapons manufacturing that Reiji had been working on. 1

“After all, there’ s no business as profitable as weapons. History has proven that.” ^^^^^^^^^^^

Immediately after he became president. When Reiji asked about his true intentions behind the drastic overhaul of the business, this was the answer Koichi gave him.

This is Reiji’ s assessment of Koichi.

″True, he is a man who built a small pharmaceutical company into a global enterprise in a single generation. He has crossed countless dangerous bridges:

The amount of bribes he’ d paid and the number of people he’ d buried in the shadows were beyond count.

But Koichi is even more “sharp” than Reiji.

Bold, in a good way... Nii’->◆1E

In a bad way, he’ s a bit naive. That’ s also a privilege of

someone who' s never had to struggle. Koichi' s sharp temper was both reassuring and… a little scary. That' s why, even after becoming chairman, I' ve been keeping a close eye on him as much as possible.

I suppose Koichi finds that annoying. Lately, he' s started consciously avoiding Reiji.

His manner of speaking has also changed.

Even when they were alone, he used honorifics just as he did in public. "

"I was worried about your safety, Chairman,"

Koichi said as the two walked down the hallway alone. "Nika--"

Is he really worried? :》1? -*> 『.-i-产^ -1 Could it be that Koichi had the helicopter attack to get rid of a nuisance…?-For just a moment, such a thought even crossed Reiji' s mind.

He immediately spoke as if to shake off that thought.

"Are you busy?"

"Yes. But why did you come for an on-site inspection during such a dangerous time?" "To make sure you don' t do anything reckless."

Reiji answered honestly.

Koichi stopped and looked at Reiji.

Then, he suddenly burst out laughing. He clutched his stomach and laughed heartily. Reiji didn' t laugh. He stared intently at Koichi.

"I-I' m sorry. It' s just that the Chairman told such a funny joke…" "I didn' t tell a joke, nor did I say anything funny. I merely spoke the truth." Hearing this, Koichi laughed even louder:.-J; ■ "So, how' s the work

going?” ·ko:· Reiji asked Koichi, who couldn’t stop laughing, with a look of irritation. “Heh heh heh··· There’s no need to worry. The Metal Worker Project is progressing smoothly. More importantly ″

Koichi suddenly stopped laughing: ユ:、・ As if his earlier laughter had been a lie, he stared at Reiji with a cold gaze and said, “We need to take care of those terrorists.” Feeling as though his thoughts had been read, Reiji looked away and said, “Ah, yes. It may be time to change our strategy. I’ll consult with the leaders of both nations .″

he muttered. ■X/O

″I’d really appreciate it if you could do that. When dealing with top-level executives, a young upstart like me tends to be looked down on, so I really need your help, Chairman. By the way...″ Whenever he finished speaking, he would always leave a lingering pause and gaze intently at his listener, as if probing them. · It was Koichi’s habit.^^* ■・ “Did you notice, Chairman?” Gun: Pi: .Nii: Ni-ni;; “W-what are you talking about?” “・・

“I’m talking about the guys who just protected your helicopter from the terrorists.”

“The OCU mercenary unit, right?”

“Yes.”

“I received calls from those two, one after the other. They said they’d been dispatched to counter the terrorists.” /../. “Anything else?” ■ He looked at Reiji with a probing gaze.

Eyes brimming with parental concern. Eyes that would never let him get away with hiding anything ; It was not the kind of look a son would give his father.

Reiji stared back with an intimidating gaze, his eyes filled with reproach.

Koichi twisted his lips into a smirk, looked down,

“So what are you talking about?!”

“It’ s Ryuji.”

“Ryuji? You mean ―ベ：―･’’■ ‘ ‘ ■ Stunned by the completely unexpected words, Reiji was at a loss for words. “That’ s right. Ryuji was in that mercenary unit.” ■

“Ryuji was in there

“It seems he fought with all his might once he realized the Chairman was on board. Don’ t you think that’ s just like him—so devoted to his parents?” He shot Reiji a mocking glance. *.:,1—;二二；ド’--;-> But Reiji couldn’ t return the glare. He was that shaken.◆ ’*; “Well then, Chairman. Shall we begin the inspection right away? Or would you like to take a break?” Koichi asked with exaggerated politeness, a smile still on his lips.

“I’ d like to rest a little…” Reiji wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief he’ d pulled out.

″Is that... it? I thought so.″

Koichi stopped and opened a nearby door.

Inside was a bedroom: 2—**.^

It was spacious and airy. The decor was on par with a luxury hotel’ s VIP suite. “Here, please.You must be exhausted from the long journey. Please get some rest.” Koichi stood by the door, urging Reiji in. Almost as if he were forcing him inside. J If this were the usual Reiji, he would have glared back and muttered some curse. ;:’ But Reiji said nothing and entered the room 0 2

″Lie down and take it easy .”

The door closed, and he was left alone.

He stood there, dumbfounded.

Suddenly, ^M^^^o

“To think Ryuji was part of a mercenary unit on this island…”

In that brief moment, he seemed to have aged beyond his actual years.

# Chapter 21

The mountains of Huffman Island stretched out below.

A tropical paradise, blanketed by the beautiful nature of the Southern Hemisphere. ff;■嘖二二·丶^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
It’ s hard to believe it’ s engulfed in the flames of war.

But even that is nearing its end.

“Ugh. Now of all times.”

Breakwood clicked his tongue as he looked down at the island’ s landscape. Olson, sitting next to him, said,

“You seem to be in a bad mood.” ˜.’-;二、一- 1 :

Inside an OCU military helicopter. They were en route to Lupidis City. .″1丶 “Of course I am. A ceasefire agreement right when we’ re on the verge of total victory. What are those politicians thinking?” ・ Breakwood spat out the words.

・Olson gave a wry smile and said;- 二

“The ceasefire is based on mediation by the International Peacekeeping Organization. There’ s nothing we can do about it ″

he said, trying to smooth things over. 1ハr二1-
Blakewood’ s expression grew even more grim. Staring down at Olson, he shouted, “So you’ re telling me to just do whatever the Zaftora Republic says?”

.♦ he shouted. .>. T

“We have no choice.”

″I suppose there's no helping it. The Republic of Zaftora is nothing but a pack of hyenas. <Niki

They have hardly any power to speak of; they’ re merely clinging to the phantom of the former superpower, the Soviet Union—or rather, Russia.”

At Breakwood’ s words, Olson’ s expression stiffened. -一二. 二''''” But to avoid being noticed, he quickly put on an ambiguous smile, ·:’1-7 こ'- “All we can do is pull the young men off the battlefield before any more needless casualties are made.”

Now it was Blakewood’ s turn to give a wry smile. “I can’ t believe I’ m hearing those words from you.”

He turned his gaze back out the window.

He squinted. Between the mountains, points of light shone in various hues.

It’ s Vantua. They’ re preparing for battle.

・No wonder. They don’ t know about the ceasefire decision yet. ^^ From the window on the opposite side, Olson looked outside. . i He must have spotted the Vantour on the ground. J “It’ s about time to relay the orders.” He took his cell phone out of his pocket. ;- Blakewood swallowed hard. , ’ ″It can't be helped. This is my mission. · Ah, it's me.″’ ■ Ni Olson spoke to his daughter while watching Breakwood through his sunglasses. ″The USN, with its command structure destroyed, is retreating repeatedly. 丶 To ensure this victory, we have decided to launch a pursuit operation. You lot, begin your operations as well.” - What does “before any more needless casualties occur” even mean? He’ s casually ignoring the contradiction. : The lines on Blakewood’ s face twist with hatred.■ I know. I understand. -*-

This is war. This is what the higher-ups do when they move their pieces.

Starting with myself .

He desperately fought the urge to snatch the receiver. The urge to tell his daughter the truth. He looked down at the island. w

No flames are rising yet. No explosions can be heard. If I go now, I can still make it. Listening to Olson' s orders from beside him, Breakwood endured in silence. His clenched fists had turned white, drained of blood.

"Roger. We' ll begin pursuing the enemy unit immediately."

Receiving orders from Olson, Natalie shouted. ·'·ヽ·

"Hans' s voice rang out immediately.®产1. "Enemy unit spotted! 3-4 kilometers south-southeast, retreating. Fifteen aircraft " ';: "Alright. We' re not letting them get away."

Keith dashes forward.

"I' ll take care of about ten of them."

JJ lined up and took off alongside him'O◆Mora;B-

"Hey. Be careful! The enemy' s fighting for their lives too, you know."

Just as Lloyd shouted, two planes had already closed in on the enemy formation. Yan, Eihin, and Sakata were doing the same. Gunfire erupted, and orange flames bloomed across the ground. Immediately, a radio transmission from the enemy formation rang out. W2: "C-Captain! We' re cornered!" Just listening to it, you could feel their fear. It was a pitiful voice. "Don' t flinch. All units, prepare to charge! We are a unit descended from the U.S. Army that once shaped the world in the 20th century. Show those bastards the pride of the USN!" "Roger, copy that!"

But there was a difference in morale greater than that between adults and children. The Canyon Crows were completely

overwhelming the enemy. Yet the USN forces did not flee, but fought desperately. Their refusal to lose their pride as soldiers until the very end was admirable.

“Hey, it’ s okay. Just this once, you can raise the white flag.” ‘1’ ■ Keith said. He said it deliberately, making sure the enemy could hear. It was the first time he’ d ever uttered such words in the middle of a battle.

“Since we’ re going back to the country soon anyway, it’ s better to make it back alive

Even JJ muttered those words.

A mood unlike any other began to hang in the air.

As if sensing that atmosphere,

・The radio crackled. .1-^^^^^^^^. ; i ''' :'

〈To all OCU and USN soldiers: Beza

The two countries have decided to declare a ceasefire at 4:00 p.m. today. Both armies are to withdraw immediately to their nearest bases. Repeat: The two countries have decided to declare a ceasefire today...〉 1Ni-

“Cease fire!”

Lloyd shouted.,; ヽ一」-, 「'- 〈What on earth is going on!〉

An enemy soldier asked his superior. -

〈There’ s nothing to it. The war is over. Get back here immediately.〉 ''1-? '' 〈That’ s ridiculous. Then what on earth have we been fighting for^^!〉 The enemy soldier is quite enraged. 2-2;S^ - 〈That’ s what war is.〉 3

Heh, heh, heh 〉

〈Withdraw immediately.〉

″N-No way!″

〈What did you say?〉

〈I-I can’ t face the ones who died if we stay like this!〉 The enemy unit has gone on the offensive. BB Natalie shouts.

“Captain. The enemy isn’ t retreating. They’ re coming right at us!” ,, #'- “Are you still up for this?!”

Yang shouts. ″W-what are we going to do?″

Keith asks. 11

“T-that’ s ridiculous…”

Sakata muttered. - -

Every voice carried a note of anguish. 2, 2″; 2:1 1 ″Waaah!″- Eihin’ s right arm was blown off by enemy fire. ″H-help me~! They’ re targeting me~!″ Peewee screams.

Lloyd made his decision.

“We have no choice. All units, resume combat!” “W-wait. The war is already over.”

Frederick said.

Frederick’ s Vanzar was struck almost immediately. The shell embedded itself in the hull. Without a word, Lloyd fired his Zweig rifle at the enemy. In less than a minute, the fighting ceased. 2-1. “The enemy unit… has been completely wiped out,” Natalie said, biting her lip.

She looked around. The wreckage of the enemy Vanzers lay scattered in a gruesome state. “This is crazy. Why…? The war is over…” Frederick’ s eyes widened.

“It turned into a battle with a bad aftertaste.” Keith said bitterly. Silence. They stood there in silence. “Hmm.” JJ said quietly.

“Is the war over…?”

″Yesterday, the Second Huffman Conflict came to a close.

This ceasefire was established after the OC and USN accepted a proposal from the Republic of Zaftora, a permanent member of the International Peacekeeping Organization.

Both military forces stationed on Huffman Island will be placed under the administration of the Republic of Zaftora for the time being as a peacekeeping force.

International public opinion has praised the Republic of Zaftora's actions as a "just mediation," and attention is now focused on the International Peacekeeping Organization, whose raison d'être had long been questioned.

From the New York Days 〉 It was an hour after the ceasefire was decided that a direct call came in to Olson at the OCU military office in Lupidis. 2: · As soon as he picked up the receiver, the other party began speaking unilaterally.

〈So far, everything is going according to plan.〉 "Ah ″

〈This marks a step forward for our homeland in restoring its lost status and honor.〉 〈Listen, your real mission starts now. You understand that - don't you~·〉

″Leave that part to Sakata.″

“Sakata, you say?” y<

■ ■Without answering Olson’ s question, the other man said■ “You just need to keep an eye on them to make sure they don’ t escape. And you must faithfully carry out the plan our homeland has laid out. Do you understand?” W- “B-but…”

“There’ s no room for hesitation now. If there’ s a single mistake, your head will roll immediately. Don’ t forget that, Comrade Olson.” T二:″.yT;ゴ’た：-

“I understand.”

The call ended. ■--

Olson didn’ t hang up the receiver. The dial tone rang out. Kotoka was tense... ■ “His expression is as stiff as a stone statue. --.^

A single drop of liquid trickled down the side of his sunglasses…:・.

It was unclear whether it was sweat or a tear.

# Chapter 22

It was the operations command room at the military office in Fort Monas City. : : Zni--, Sui. Olson and the members of Canyon Crow were facing each other. “As you know, all military units on this island have been incorporated into the Peacekeeping Forces,” ■ Olson said.^^^P “So, does that mean this is Canyon Crow’ s disbandment ceremony?” JJ asked. :^^^^^^i “No. Our primary mission as Canyon Crow will be the eradication of the terrorist group ‘Huffman’ s Soul.’ ” “Us, Canyon Crow, huh?” Keith said, placing particular emphasis on the phrase “us.” Olson’ s face twitched for a moment, but he continued. “The target of our guns has changed, but we expect you to carry out your mission just as before.” :- “I hope there won’ t be any cut in the bounty, right?”

JJ asked.

“Of course not. There’ s no way that would happen.”

“Well, you see. I heard the Republic of Zaftora got involved. I’ ve heard that the folks over there love taking money, but they hate paying it out…”

Olson cut JJ off. ■ “Let’ s get right to it. Here’ s the order. There’ s a former USN field hospital northeast of this town. A doctor there named Brown is suspected of colluding with terrorists. Investigating him is your next mission. Get ready and head out as soon as you’ re ready.”

“Hey, wait a minute. We’ ve been fighting nonstop and haven’ t even had a proper meal,” Keith complained.

“That’ s all.” | 2 With just those words, Olson hurriedly left the command room. “Tch, mercenary units don’ t treat us like human beings, do they?” Keith kicked the table.

“Captain…”

Natalie looked at Lloyd, seeking his judgment.

Lloyd quietly stood up.

“We’ ll launch in thirty minutes. However, I won’ t force anyone. Only those who volunteer.”

■ With that, he left the command room. He walked down the hallway.^^^^^^^^^^

“Wait a minute!”

Frederick ran after him.

“Don’ t you think this is strange? A sudden ceasefire. And then, as if they’ d been waiting for it, an investigation into a doctor colluding with terrorists. It’ s all too convenient.”

Lloyd didn’ t stop.

Frederick kept talking to him one-sidedly. ’

“I’ ve gathered a lot of information on the ‘Soul of Huffman.’ I don’ t think they’ re just ordinary terrorists. They never attack civilians, but they’ ve got it in for Sakata Industries. It feels like they have some kind of agenda or conviction.”

“I’ m just a mercenary. I only follow orders.”

Lloyd said as he walked. He stepped out of the office.

The town was teeming with people following the ceasefire.

Here and there, people were raising their glasses in celebration.

“I don’ t see it that way. Disobeying orders is second nature to you, after all.”

″Aren’t you just using your position in the mercenary unit to your advantage?″

Frederick pressed the issue relentlessly.

Still, Lloyd didn’t stop walking.

Frederick said, sounding irritated.

″Isn’t finding your girlfriend the only thing on your mind?″; Ichiue.—

Lloyd’s footsteps halted.

He closed in on Frederick. He glared at him with a fierce look. ;::><” —Faced with that terrifying intensity, Frederick caught his breath.

Just as he braced himself for a blow, Lloyd looked away and said, “Maybe so ,”

he muttered.

At that moment, Frederick realized

what was in Lloyd’s eyes was not anger. It was , if I had to describe it, a wasteland. A wasteland where only the wind howled across parched earth—that was what lay in Lloyd’s eyes. Frederick took a step back.

Lloyd walked away without meeting his gaze.

He vanished instantly into the crowd, into the distance.

# Chapter 23

The former USN field hospital clung to the desolate land. It was not a building.

Military tents: Nearly ten tents, large and small, were scattered about.

Children were running around between the tents. A middle-aged woman could be seen deep in conversation. "I'll go find out what's going on. Everyone else, stay in the van and wait." · Lloyd got out of the van. —

"It's dangerous to go alone. I need someone else...

Keith stopped speaking. :=51,;- JJ continued. - ヽ一.'-
"I'm coming too." :- JJ leaped down from the van.

"I'm coming too. When it comes to canvassing, I'm a pro." Frederick followed the two.

Frederick immediately called out to a middle-aged man nearby.

"Excuse me. I'm a reporter for the Tokyo Times. I hear there's a Dr. Brown here."

The woman, who had seemed a bit nervous, relaxed the moment she heard Brown's name. "It's all thanks to the Doctor. He's the reason our kids are healthy and well. Right, everyone?" As soon as she called out, a crowd gathered. People began talking about Brown one after another.
"There's not a single person here who has a bad word to say about the doctor." "He may have a sharp tongue, but he's a really good person." "—く - "Since the war ended, most of the wounded were sent to the town hospital. But for some reason, the doctor stayed here."

Frederick quieted the crowd.

"Thank you. I understand. I'll go meet the doctor directly

and hear his side of the story." "If you write anything bad about the doctor, we won' t stand for it. Right, everyone?" "That' s right. Make him out to be a hero in your story."

The people seemed starved for conversation.

Once they got started, they couldn' t stop. :-, Ni1

"I' ll leave the rest to you." ;^^^^ ・#く

JJ winked at Frederick. He headed toward the tent where he' d been told Brown was with Lloyd:^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ .^^^^^

· As he walked alongside Lloyd, J j muttered under his breath. ^^″*'ふ·->-・ :'ニヽ:″、*″--2エー ″I think I understand. To the elderly on the brink of death from illness or malnutrition, and to those struggling to raise children, doctors are like gods.″ Mr f had a look on his face as if he were recalling something.

He looked around,

"True enough. It' s been a hell of a place for a long time now: :

he muttered to himself.

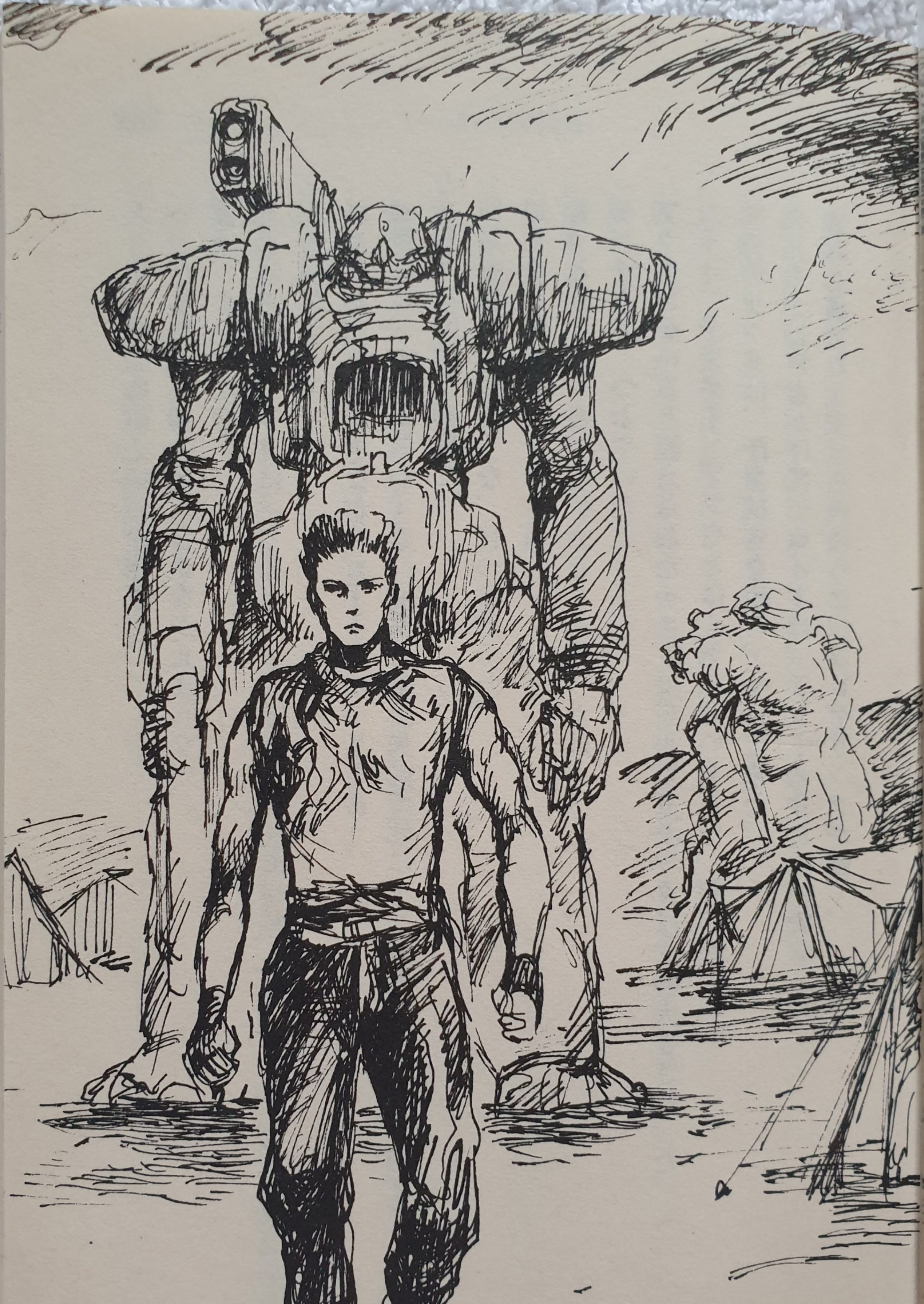
The tent where I was told Brown was staying was about the size of a small truck.

"Phew. Dr. Brown has an almost eerie reputation." ;>'-く''; Frederick arrived, wiping the sweat from his brow.

″Excuse me,″ Lloyd said, stepping inside the tent.

JJ stood with his weapon at the ready, followed by Frederick.

A man in a white coat was walking toward the examination table. A young child was lying on the table, looking listless and weak. A woman who appeared to be the child' s mother was holding the child' s hand. "Jimmy. Cheer up, Jimmy "



she said, tears streaming down her face. The child didn’ t even react. :,:''1, , Without even looking up, the man said. J “Dr. Brown, isn’ t it?”

Lloyd—

The man looked up. 6,

True to his name, he had brown hair and a beard. Both were unkempt. : . . . Through his thick glasses, his eyes appeared double.

“Who are you guys?” 7 “We’ re the Peacekeeping Force. You’ re suspected of colluding with terrorists. We’ re here to investigate.”

“Terrorists? That’ s ridiculous.”

··Brown said in a furious tone, ″Nini-jo Ni-ichi, Zero. ■ ■

“I was a science and technology officer in the OCU military. There’ s no way a man like me would side with terrorists.”

“But—”

“Get out! I’ m seeing a patient right now!” he yells. There’ s no getting through to him.

“Let’ s try again later,”

JJ said. His eyes were fixed on the suffering child. Lloyd nodded and left the tent. Frederick followed. - JJ closed his eyes without a word. He offered a silent prayer for the boy, unseen by anyone, before stepping outside. · .M1J, “We’ re not spies. We can’ t do any investigating,” JJ said..？. :— Shi 7—ll-e -Za：-″;.} “Anyway, I’ m going to make the rounds of the tents a bit more and try to gather some intel.” Frederick headed toward the tents where people were gathered. The ground beneath his feet suddenly bulged. .. : ” · An unidentified Vantour emerged from

within.

There were five of them^^.

Screams. Women and children running in panic.

“Who are you?!”

One Lloyd raised his gun: Ni ■”

“We are the ‘Souls of Huffman.’ Hand over Brown, who is here!” The Van Tour at the front said. One

“What do you want with Brown!?”

“Brown betrayed us. He pretended to cooperate with us on the surface, but behind our backs, he leaked our information to the Peacekeeping Forces!”

“What the—

“Step aside.”

“If you do, we’ ll blow this place—hospital and all—to smithereens.”

The enemy says triumphantly.

JJ stepped forward. ″Ni; Ni--■Y'- —Ni de: Ni Ni·Mon Ni I'Ni San

″I won't let you pass here.″

He fired his machine gun in rapid succession.

Every single bullet ricocheted off the Vantour’ s alloy.

“Hahaha. To take on a Vantour with your bare hands—you’ re an anachronistic nigger.” The enemy Vantour laughed loudly and aimed his shotgun at JJ. “Run, JJ!” 3’ ″ /, ″.: ·Lloyd shouted. ヽ; '-^z 、 : : - “But JJ wouldn’ t back down. -■

″I said you're not getting into this tent. Ugh !″ He screams as he fires his machine gun. :J-ニー' ″ . 『E, 『 When

he runs out of ammo. M-T-P: ″:ーニニ:-?'?.1″ニ:'・All five enemy Vantours were completely destroyed. .:″./;:こ、.>:. JJ is unharmed.

Lloyd and Frederick, too. Nini-ni-ni-1''- ″ The tent and the others weren’ t even scratched. “That was cool, partner.”

Keith said from inside the Van Tour.

The ″F-3 Hand Rod″ he held was stained a deep, sticky red-black. ″You're so reckless. You should have just left it to us...″

Yan laughs.

“I’ ve got a new respect for you, JJ.”

Sakata said

“I think the heat got to me. I’ m going to get some water.”

JJ turned his back and walked away.

The children nearby must have heard those words.

The children nearby all disappeared into the tent at once, then rushed out carrying containers of water

and rushed over. -

They scrambled to hand JJ their containers of water. ' ' Without drinking the water from the container he received, he splashed it on his face. Haa; F: After soaking his face thoroughly with water, JJ took a delicious-looking sip from the water the children were offering.

# Chapter 24

Inside Dr. Brown’ s tent…

The child had finished treatment and had already been moved to another tent. Besides Brown, there were Lloyd, Natalie, Sakata, Frederick, Yang, and Yi-Hing.

“So you really were a terrorist after all?” Yang asked.

“No. I don’ t know anything about that. It’ s just a baseless accusation,” Brown denied.

“But then, why would ‘Huffman’ s Soul’ attack you?”
“That’ s what I’ d like to ask you,” Brown replied. ■
“Oh, no!” Hans rushed into the tent.

“What’ s wrong?”

"They weren't terrorists after all!"

"What did you say!?"

Hans showed Lloyd the unit insignia he was holding.

“Isn’ t this an OCU regular army unit insignia? Where on earth did you find it?” “I found it while searching through one of their vans.” Lloyd looked at the OCU unit insignia and said, “So that means the OCU military disguised themselves as terrorists and carried out the attack…”
“What on earth is going on?” Sakata asked.

Brown stood up. Walking slowly, he said, “The OCU ...so they’ ve finally tracked us down here " "What do you mean? Explain it to us," Yan asked impatiently. Brown stopped at the edge of the tent. *Zeni "I..." With his back still turned to Lloyd and the others,

“During my time as a science and technology officer in the

OCU military, I was conducting secret research. It involved inputting information into the brains of fetuses created through artificial insemination." "W-what? Such inhumane experiments… I can' t believe it." ·

Frederick

"It was indeed a terrible experiment. But back then, I was only thinking about gaining fame. I didn' t feel the slightest bit of guilt.

But when I moved on to the next stage, even a fool like me finally realized the horror of what they were aiming for."

"The next stage… did you conduct other experiments as well?" 1¥ Brown slowly turned his head. J-: He nodded. He looked as though he couldn' t bear to look up. -: Ni f-: With his head bowed, as if in confession,

"I was asked a question by an OCU officer. Whether I could control the brain of an adult," ″

"An adult' s brain!" - Panny, ">¥-· 一 ; ; 厂 : Brown nodded,

″I replied that it was theoretically possible. Then the officer said, ':■'■-/ 'In that case, starting today, you will participate in an experiment

'

It was only then that I, foolish as I was, realized for the first time the horror of what I was doing. "I see. I can' t believe it."

Nisakata banged his fist against his knee. ;;- "Was that an OCU experiment?" Frederick asked, the only one remaining calm. - , Ni "- " '. "As a research nut, I don' t know the full story. But I ran away. I got scared and ran for my life. And that' s how I ended up here." ' "So that' s why you didn' t try to go back to town?" ″That' s part of it. But I

tried to be of use to people here. I risked my life to save the people here: : : °

"But I cannot wash away the sins of my research. On the contrary, I have even put the patients here in danger. I can' t stay here any longer. I' m leaving." Brown slowly walked toward the entrance of the tent.

"He lifted the hanging sheet..." 1. There, a large crowd stood.

Every single one of them stared at Brown with serious expressions, refusing to let him pass.

"Doctor. You' re a great doctor. Please keep working for all of us!" said a man with a bandage wrapped around his head.

"That's right. Don't go! Keep being our support forever!" said a woman. She was the mother of the boy who had just been treated. "Nini?" "You leaving here isn't the solution," JJ said. "Nini." "Ah Yeah, I get it. Thank you, everyone " Brown took off his glasses and looked down.

"But… I' m leaving,"

He looked up. His gaze was stern. "The OCU will come back here. They' ll come looking for me. And when they do, I won' t be able to protect everyone here…"

· He adjusted his thick glasses. M: "Don' t worry. The war is over now. Without me, you won' t get hurt anymore. From here on out, you' ll be able to manage just fine on your own."

Brown began to walk forward.

The crowd gathered in front of the tent slowly parted in two.

Brown walked through the gap.

"Where are you going?"

Frederick asked. J Brown turned around.

"To a place where I won' t be a burden to others anymore…" ko·ni;-;,' ,

He looked around at each person. .1:- * Through his glasses, he could see his eyes welling up: :.

Before the tears could fall, Brown turned his back.

At the edge of the tent village, he got into the jeep. 4 " Without looking back, he drove off.

Until he was completely out of sight. Until the sound of the jeep' s engine faded away entirely.

Not a single person opened their mouth or even moved.

Frederick was the first to move.

He stood in front of Lloyd.

"Sorry, but I' m going to go my own way from here, too."

"There' s something I really need to look into. I have a feeling I might be able to uncover the true cause of this war."

"You' re a civilian anyway. Do whatever you want." ■ ">■ Nii 1 "Sorry for being so selfish." --- J "Hey, Bunya. If anything happens, I' ll come to your rescue. For a fee, of course." Keith says. , " : ^^^^^^1^^^^^^^^^ "Take this. You can communicate with us no matter where you are." Hans tossed him a small radio. J - I "Thanks. I' ll contact you via Picore as soon as I find out anything." "Nii, 'Ni' ." Frederick got into his Van Tour. -二 ; -^^^ He disappeared at a brisk pace. Compared to when they first met, his driving skills had improved dramatically.

# Chapter 25

Upon returning to Fort Monas, Lloyd immediately headed for the military office. He went straight to Olson’s command room. *Thud* He suddenly opened the door. Olson was sitting at his desk, reviewing documents.

“Just because you’re a mercenary doesn’t mean you can’t follow basic etiquette like knocking,” Olson said, looking up with a reproachful tone.

“I’d like an explanation.”

Lloyd stood at the doorway and said, “I have something to report.” Olson let out a deep sigh.

″Well, fine. I was just about to send for you myself.″ He closed the documents and pointed to the chair in front of the desk.

Lloyd didn’t move.

He remained standing, staring at Olson.

Olson gave a wry smile and put a cigar in his mouth.

He lit it with a showy flourish.

He exhaled the smoke slowly, then said,

“Brown knows OCU’s secrets.”

″That's why OCU tried to get rid of him. They probably made him pose as a terrorist to deny any connection between Brown and OCU.

″It would be a disaster if the International Peacekeeping Organization found out,″ he said, as if it were someone else’s problem. ″—″ ″You wouldn’t have been behind this, would you?″

Olson replied, looking offended,

“I’ m a soldier through and through. I don’ t give a damn about what scientists do,”

he flatly denied. Immediately changing the subject, he said, “Never mind that. There’ s someone I want you to meet. They should be here by now.” ” Olson picked up the receiver.

He spoke a few words, then hung up.

“Perfect timing. He’ s on his way here right now.”

The door opened. 1″″

A tall, thin man, ^^-^L^o w

stopped right in front of Lloyd and gave an ambiguous smile O 2: 2>^^^ “Let me introduce you. This is Mr. Koichi Sakata, president of Sakata Industries.” “My brother is always under your care.”

“My brother?” ^1 Lloyd asked, looking puzzled.

Sakata looked surprised. J “GoL : “Haven’ t you heard anything from Ryuji?” Keiichi-:1 “Ryuji? Surely not 17 Go

″Yes. Your subordinate, Ryuji Sakata, is my younger brother.″

“It’ s been ten years since he ran away from home. We’ d been searching for him, thinking he was missing, but it turns out he joined the military and has been under your care all this time.” He was stating the facts matter-of-factly. That was the tone of his voice. -: , Ni’: ‘-1 Lloyd was at a loss for words. .一 · ''1

Sakata and I have been friends since he joined the unit. And yet... Only now did I realize that I knew nothing about him. “By the way, I didn’ t want to meet with you to talk about that.” Sakata changed the subject without a hint of emotion. a .+ “Actually, I’ d like to recruit you.” Sakata

smiled. : ; :'■'V - No. It was too devoid of emotion to be called a smile. He merely twisted his lips and cheeks as if doing so out of a sense of duty. “The president seems to have taken quite a liking to your performance,” Olson said. *', ; : Sakata curved his lips into a U-shape with a click, like a mechanical doll. “That’s right. We’d like to welcome you as the test pilot for our company’s latest Vantour. Of course, that’s after you’ve finished hunting down the terrorists and disbanded ‘Canyon Crow,’ mind you.” ^^ ^^M. . · Sakata added, as if trying to curry favor with Olson.

The phone on the desk rang.

“Excuse me.”

Olson picked up the receiver.

His expression stiffened.

“All right, understood. I’ll have them get ready immediately.”

As soon as he hung up, he said to Lloyd. .*G黑. ; ^ “Apparently, a group suspected of being terrorists is heading toward this town.” Sakata spoke up before Lloyd could.

“W-what? A terrorist group?”

For the first time, emotion flashed across his mask-like face. Ka:- “Lloyd. Intercept them immediately.” - “Got it.” .一^^L Lloyd bolted out of the room. —广·二: “T-their target is me,” Ko-ichi, '''- , ,: As if his earlier composure had been a lie, Sakata was now in a panic. “Don’t worry. Canyon Crow will protect you.” “No. Just those guys aren’t enough. That’s it. Let me make a call.” Without waiting for Olson’s reply, Sakata snatched up the receiver.

As soon as the other person answered, she screamed in a voice that sounded desperate.

"What are you panicking about?"

"The terrorists are here. They're definitely after me. H-help me!" "P-please. If anything happens to me, all our plans will go down the drain. If that happens, you and your country will suffer immense damage. S-so " 1 "All right," Isakata said, clutching the receiver. "Suni-ichi ◆·I'∷ "Y-yes, do that. Quickly, it' s urgent!" Z · He shouted into the already disconnected phone. :■ He was pitifully confused.

He didn' t even notice Olson' s wry smile.

# Chapter 26

“Even once you’ re inside Fort Monas, under no circumstances are you to touch any civilian facilities. The target is Sakata and Sakata alone!” · “

In the Van Tour, which resembled a void of darkness, the man barked out orders.

Like the van tour, his outfit was all black. “◆ The ■ He’ s wearing a full-face helmet.

Not even his expression could be discerned.

His name is Gentsu Viser.

His background and age are unknown. He never reveals them. There is only one thing we know for certain:

That was simply that he was the leader of ″The Soul of Huffman.″

It was confirmed that Koichi Sakata, president of Sakata Industries, was at Fort Monas. Accompanied by several subordinates, he boarded the ship.

But the enemy had already prepared to intercept them: -:
‘ · ·

“Has Olson’ s unit arrived as well?”

A cold voice rang out over the radio. J J· Ehin shouted. .^^^^^^^^^” Ni, “That’ s Driscoll’ s voice!”

″Eihin, do you know anything about this!? 21, ·5:1,, Nyu;: - Lloyd asks 0 5, L 2;’ ″Yeah. He's the field supervisor for the Nirvana Agency!″ —Ue ″What? So he's the one who took Karen!″

1

The scene from the Larkas incident, when he faced off

against Driscoll, vividly came back to him. Lloyd’ s Van Tour raced forward. “Not toward the ‘Soul of Hafman’ that had received the order to repel us, but toward Driscoll’ s Van Tour.” “Stop it! He’ s not an enemy anymore. We need to work together to defeat the enemy!” Olson’ s voice rang out. 2: But it didn’ t reach Lloyd’ s ears.

“Captain. Calm down!”

Natalie desperately tries to hold him back.

“Let go. I can’ t forgive him—I can’ t forgive Driscoll!” Natalie’ s scream overlapped with the gunshot. ^^^^^^^^ It hit Lloyd’ s leg.

Natalie stood in front of Lloyd. Smoke rose from the barrel of the shotgun on her right arm, the “Cat’ s Ray”

And yet, she kept the muzzle pointed at Lloyd,

“Don’ t move!

″Natalie ″

″If you attack him, I’ ll shoot you!″

“Natalie, step back. That man is Karen’ s killer.”

″No, I won’ t back down.″

″Why? Why are you getting in my way?″

″This isn’t just your problem. If you, the captain, commit a serious act of treason, all of us will be punished.″

″Damn it. Another failure. Retreat!″

Gents’ voice.

The rest of the Canyon Crow unit, except for Lloyd and Natalie, had already scattered the “Soul of Huffman.”

<Heh heh heh. It seems there really was no need for me to

step in after all. See you again, Lloyd.>

“Wait ″-

Lloyd raised his Tweige rifle.

At the same time, Natalie pulled the trigger on Callie: ” ',''',¥一 ; ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ “Lloyd’ s right arm gets blown off., : '一 <エ^^ “Na6ri 1·1 一

″Now I’m going to shoot him in the body.″

Natalie spoke with a voice as calm as it was filled with passion and resolve. ″What?″

″D-damn it, Karen-go’■ Driscoll’ s Van Tour drove away with an air of nonchalance.

Watching its retreating figure, Lloyd bit his lip. Bright red blood dripped from his lips onto the Vantour.

Olson, who had rushed over, slapped Lloyd across the face the moment he saw him.

“Enough already. The war is already over.” Lloyd glared back at Olson and said,

“The war between me and Karen isn’ t over.”

“You’ re such a ″

Natalie stepped in... “Yo...; ◆·· ◆ ‘ ▪

- Olson looked away from Lloyd: 1一. “Two.”

He said to Natalie:

“We’ ve received intelligence that terrorists have been spotted in the Tucker Mountains to the northeast. You take command and head to the scene immediately.” ■.亠..1

“But-”

Natalie glanced at Lloyd.

Olson immediately

“This guy is unfit to be a squad leader.” :,噪: ;一.一:

Sakata immediately says,

″I only follow Captain Lloyd’ s orders.″

″What!?″

Olson glared at Sakata. But Sakata didn’ t flinch.

″Just because we’ re a mercenary unit doesn’ t mean there isn’ t such a thing as order.″

JJ, 31, 20

″If the boss is ignored, we’ re left with no standing.″

Kiss said, “ ” ;

“You lot ″

Olson’ s body trembled with rage.” :; ;:-, : Before that, Lloyd stood up and said to the crew, “All units, board your craft. Head to the Tucker Mountains immediately.” “Roger!”

″Roger that, boss!″

The members of Canyon Crow hurriedly left the room.

Lloyd faced off against Olson.

″Once I’ ve taken it on, I see it through to the end. That’ s my principle,″ he said, then ran out of the room. ’ ■’:

# Chapter 27

Tucker Mountains

The green mountainside had been carved away, exposing the earth and rock. ↘* An old building stood in a roughly leveled clearing. It was a cement factory built shortly after the settlement of Huffman Island began. -- However, due to its inconvenient location, it had been closed for over ten years. .-''1 Both the building and the surrounding ground were completely overgrown. “A faint signal on the sensor… from beneath the factory,” Hans said. 1 · It seemed the enemy was hiding underground beneath the ruins of the cement factory. , .

“Are we going to attack?”

JJ asked.

“Sakata, fire the missiles! The rest of you, attack any enemies that emerge,” Lloyd ordered. “This

Sakata operated the missile launcher mounted on his shoulder, the "Donkey Dx"

“Captain, I' m ready.”

“We' re ready whenever you are,”

Keith says with a smirk.

"Alright. Attack!" :2m1 Sakata's shoulder burst open. -::

The projectile from the Donkey DX, which had briefly soared into the air, locked onto its target and flew at a terrifying speed.

Through a narrow opening, they infiltrated the basement of the abandoned factory. '2' Immediately, a column of fire shot up. T: "Hey! Cease fire!" - ・1- '- . A Vantour emerged from the smoke:.^

"Alright, I've got you!"

Keith closed in. He raised his hand rod.

Just before he struck, he hesitated.

"You... you're Frederick, aren't you!"

Seeing his opponent, Keith let out a startled cry.

The rat that had been flushed out from the underground was none other than Frederick.

"What are you doing here!?

Lloyd asked. "I' ll explain the situation. So stop fighting. Got it? Don' t attack under any circumstances." Frederick spread his arms wide.

Following Frederick, Vantour emerged from the underground. 匚: All of them are black.

No mistake. "Huffman' s soul." ·1 J "Frederick, have you joined the terrorists?!" JJ shouted. "I' m crouched in a combat stance, ready to leap at any moment."

"W-wait. They aren' t terrorists."

Frederick stood in front of the "Soul of Huffman."
"Huh?" "What do you mean?"

Lloyd asked. - "It means my journalist' s instinct was right." - J: "A journalist' s instinct!?"

Sakata asked.

He hadn' t let his guard down. With just the push of a button, he could fire a second Donkey DX at any moment. Frederic screamed at the top of his lungs. -'-·--.

"Listen. Think back. 'Huffman's Soul' never attacked civilian facilities. Yet it persistently hounded only Sakata Industries. Why is that? "What connection does it have to

Sakata Industries!″

Sakata shouted. ″Ni″

Gents, the leader of ″Huffman's Soul,″ answered that question.

“Because Sakata was preying on this island.”

″W-What?　″

Gentsu then said to the disheartened Sakata,

“I’ ve been looking into it. Ryuji Sakata. You’ re the son of Reiji Sakata, chairman of Sakata Industries. And the younger brother of Koichi, the president.” ;:1^

“What did you say　　” Me: Keith and JJ, Yang and Eihin, and even Pee-wee—who’ s too scared to say a word during battle—all raised their voices in unison. — …

“But Sakata is one of us. He has nothing to do with Sakata Industries,”

Lloyd said.

“Captain, did you know?” Sakata asked. -

“I just heard about it the other day.”

“I’ m sorry. I just forgot to mention it ″

“No need to apologize. Regardless of your family ties, you’ ve fought alongside us. I know that better than anyone.”

“Captain Lloyd”

“So you don’ t know anything about Sakata Industries’ plot, then?”

Gentsu said.

The sound of Sakata swallowing hard echoed through the room. But he didn’ t remain silent. He asked Gentsu himself.

“What exactly did my father and older brother do?”



“Sakata!”

Lloyd shouted.

“It’ s fine. Tell me everything you know.”

“If you insist, I’ ll tell you.

I once snuck into a USN factory.

I heard a rumor that Sakata Industries was collaborating with both the USN and the OCU to develop a new Vantour.

That’ s where I saw it. That factory was a facility for harvesting human brains —a biological computer for controlling mobile weapons—from human brains. ·Human fetuses created through artificial insemination have their brains extracted for the purpose of controlling the Vantour’ s airframe ″

“So, what Dr. Brown said is that my father and older brother ″■■ ″Why do you say they did such a thing?″

“Simple. He did it just to beat the other competing Vantour manufacturers.”

“That’ s the only reason!?”

“We can’ t forgive Sakata for doing something like that!”

“Dad, my older brother. Did you really ″

″Especially your older brother, Koichi—he's even crazier than our old man. ;:-

Sakata Industries’ research has now entered the next phase.

It’ s a type called the B Device ″This uses the brains of soldiers who gained experimental experience on this island.″

″Well? Do you still think what I'm doing is crazy?″ At Gentsu's words, Sakata fell silent.

″Can you prove that what you just said is true?″ Lloyd asked. Gents replied immediately.

“Of course. At the Nirvana Research Institute north of Fort Monas, potential candidates for the B Device are being gathered. They are mainly soldiers kidnapped from hospitals.” “” “What? Then, the purpose of the Nirvana Institute is ″ Eihin’s voice trembled. , O

“That’s right. They gather exceptional individuals to use as material for the B Device. It’s truly a devil’s laboratory.”

“Then, are my friends And if I’m still there, by now I myself would be ″

″Ee-hin. Pull yourself together.″

Yan runs over.

″Get out of my sight.″

Lloyd said to Gentsu. ^^^^^^^

“Are you saying you’ll let him go?”

″If what you just said isn’t true, I’ll track you down and kill you right away.″ ″I’m not lying. I swear on the hot blood flowing through my veins.″ ″I’ll investigate that myself. Until then, I’ll let you live. Hurry up and go!″ ″See you again, Lloyd. Frederick, what are you going to do?” “I’m staying in Canyon Crow to continue my reporting.”

″I’m counting on you. Make sure you report the truth.″

″I know.″

″All right, let's go.″

At Gents’ command, the “Souls of Huffman” vanished all at once. It was as fast as smoke vanishing into thin air.

“T-this can’ t be allowed! Captain, you must pursue them immediately!” Natalie shouted. Lloyd didn’ t move.

He didn’ t issue an order to pursue them either.

“Keith, please. Chase after the enemy,” Natalie shouted.

Lloyd immediately cut her off.

"There's no need for that. I'll take full responsibility." *;-.^^^ Keith spread his arms wide, saying nothing. 1- ..^^^^ ^-^^^ "Oh, Lloyd. Please stop disobeying orders any further " Natalie’ s voice was trembling. 1" "I won’ t cause trouble for anyone. All aircraft, return!" 2 Lloyd issued the order to withdraw. 3 "No, no..."

Natalie was reluctant to move. Sakata’ s footsteps were slow as well. L ; Gi Inside the truck, the atmosphere remained as dark and somber as a wake.

# Chapter 28

Olson’ s furious shout echoed through the military office.

“You had the terrorist leader cornered, and yet you let him escape?” He grabbed a chair and slammed it against the wall. “Damn it! What the hell were you thinking?” Still unable to contain his rage, he kicked the wall.

“Your punishments will be announced later. Until then, don’ t take a single step outside this town. If you do, you’ ll be shot on the spot as deserters. That’ s all. Get out!” The members of Canyon Crow left the room in silence.

From the room where Olson remained alone, the sound of shattering glass echoed. -;;:’ Most of the group walked briskly down the hallway.

“Captain.”

Natalie called out in a low voice. ■1 - : Only Lloyd stopped. ,

The two of them stood face to face in the hallway.

Natalie gazed into Lloyd’ s eyes.

She could see the fire burning deep within Lloyd’ s eyes. A hidden flame—a flame that would never go out—was burning.

Having confirmed this, Natalie said with fervor 0 “<.

″The Colonel is serious. This time, please follow orders.″ But her feelings did not reach Lloyd.

“I want to die after I know the truth. That’ s all.” He tried to turn his back on her.

“No. That’ s not it!”

Natalie cried out.

With eyes brimming with tears, she stared at Lloyd and said,

“You think Karen is alive. You’ re pinning your hopes on the fact that she was taken from the hospital in Grayrock and is alive in Nirvana.” Lloyd stared silently at Natalie.

“Why? Why can you love her so much? I’ m me®…,” Natalie’ s eyes and lips trembled like ripples.

Even so, she kept staring at Lloyd.

But the fire in Lloyd’ s eyes showed no sign of dying out. If anything, it seemed to be quietly growing brighter.

“Lloyd ″

Hiding her crumbling expression with a smile as wide as she could manage, she said, “It’ s okay. Please go. I can’ t stop you. I never could…”

Her lips trembled again. She had reached her limit. Yet Natalie still managed a smile. Hiding her true feelings behind that smile, she said,

“I can’ t follow you anymore. …Goodbye.”

“Natalie ”

At last, Lloyd spoke.

Ignoring Lloyd’ s call, Natalie turned her back on him. 1

She walked down the corridor with her back straight. Resolute, like a soldier. ·.

Until she turned the corner. Until she was away from Lloyd.

She kept telling herself that.

She couldn’ t breathe. If she breathed, the dam in her heart would break.

Because she knew that once it broke, even she wouldn’ t be able to stop it. Natalie held her breath and walked down the hallway, forcing herself to move with a calm, leisurely

stride. Lloyd left the office and headed down a back alley. Avoiding prying eyes, he made his way toward the Vantour hangar.

Only the sound of footsteps echoed on the street. ;* ; : -'; With a determined expression. Having made up her mind, she walked. : · “Two-'♦” And before she knew it, another set of footsteps had joined hers. : -1· She turned around.

It was Sakata.

With his hands in his pockets, he walked toward him in silence.

Lloyd stepped in front of him.

“This is my personal business,” Lloyd said.

Sakata glared back at him with piercing eyes.

“That’ s not true. Sakata Industries is my family. Besides ”

“ ?”

“We were all together back then, weren’ t we? You, me, and Karen ”

“Sakata”

“That’ s why I think I have the right to know this outcome, too.” Lloyd looked.

In Sakata’ s eyes, the same fire burning within himself.

The two walked side by side, in silence, down the back alley. <;,.:·▪ They got into their respective Vans.

They left town in silence. Lloyd spoke up.

“We’ ve disobeyed orders and left town. If we’ re discovered, we’ ll be shot on the spot. But if we act now, we still have time.” Sakata replied calmly,

“Let’ s go, Captain.”

“I’ m just a deserter now. Call me Lloyd.”

″No. OCU regulars, mercenaries, deserters—whatever the name, I'll keep calling you 'Captain' until the very end.″

″Sakata ″

The two Vantours moved forward, keeping their noise to a minimum.

They emerged onto the main road nearly a kilometer from the town.

A large truck came speeding toward them.

It was the OCU regular army's latest model supply truck 0 ♦:Ya, Mo·1 "Captain" : Sakata turned around.

"They're here already?"

Lloyd turned around as well.

"Leave this to me. Go on ahead." ,' Sakata loaded the bazooka on his right arm, the Boa 40. Lloyd didn't go.

"No way. As your captain, I can't allow you to go alone." He raised his Twi-Gue rifle.

The supply truck honked its horn and charged toward them.

"Watch this. I'll destroy it with a single shot." Sakata took aim.

He aimed at the driver's seat of the supply truck. —. Fuyemo. Ni The driver looked like he was about to cry and was yelling something. Sakata lowered his bazooka and said.

″Captain. It's Piu-i.″ <

"What did you say?!"

"Pi—Piwee's guy is driving over, crying his eyes out." Sakata's voice was choked with sobs.

Right before their eyes, a large, state-of-the-art supply

truck came to a stop. ''1'- ♦ Piwee got out, tears streaming down his face.

"Waaah. That was scary. Saka-yan, you were seriously going to shoot me." "Then you should've just run away. Isn't running away your specialty?" :- When Sakata said this sarcastically, Piu-i took it seriously and cried, "Saka-yan, you idiot. You're so mean. Waaah!"

and cried like a child.

"You're trying to sneak off somewhere again. It's a bad habit of yours."

Hans poked his head out of the supply truck.

Yang poked his head out.

"Eihin says he's going. Look, Eihin!" , Pushed by Yan, Eihin appeared. Staring at Lloyd, "Please leave the guide to Nirvana to me."

Hearing this, Yan's eyes welled up with tears,

"You little wimp—I used to have to protect you all the time. And before I knew it, you've become such a man…"

she said, punching Yihin in the stomach.

"Sis, that's embarrassing."

"Shut up. Who do you think cleaned up after you when you wet the bed as a kid?" "Sis, "

Yi-hin, looking embarrassed, tried to calm Yang down.

"I'm going to be a war correspondent again."

Frederick poked his head out and winked.

"Are you guys serious?"

1. Lloyd asked. KL - m ·

"Not everyone, exactly. Keith and JJ stayed behind," Pee-

wee said.

“But, Pee-wee. What happened to this supply truck?”

Sakata asked.

“It’ s pretty cool, isn’ t it? I’ ve had my eye on it for a while. It’ s the best in size, equipment, and speed

. There was only one, but no one but me could handle it. With this, the Peacekeeping Forces aren’ t scary at all.”

Pee-wee puffed out his chest. His belly stuck out, making him look like a cloth sack.

Hans, who had been holding a headset radio to his ear, said,

“Whoa. Things are getting noisy at the military office. Enough bragging—let’ s get out of town fast.”

“Captain, let’ s go. All of us!”

Sakata said.

“Thanks, everyone ”

I can’ t find the words. ·

Lloyd bit his lip and nodded.

# Chapter 29

Somewhere almost exactly halfway between Fort Monas and Solait.

Nestled quietly between the mountains stood a building that looked like an old factory.

"This is the Nirvana Agency BD Materials Factory," Eihin said. (0) Npi.1— "I can't believe you brought us to a place like this . We'd be nearly impossible to find here," Yan exclaimed in surprise.

"So this is where they manufactured the Sakata devices?" In response to Frederick's words, Eihin said, "I don't know what's going on deep inside, but probably ″Hans. What does it look like inside?″

Lloyd asked.

"Well, there's no response at all."

"What!?"

″No. There's one Vantour. And it's right nearby ″

″Wait. It's me.″ 1 1■

From the shadows of the factory, a Black Van Tour emerged. It was Gentsu.

"You were here?"

"Yeah, I got here a little early. But it's just an empty shell."

"Did it get away?"

"I don't know. It's a power "

″Alright. Frederic, Hans, Jan, and Eihin—Sakata, you're with me. We're breaking in.″ ″Eek! Don't leave me behind

all alone! Sakata -ri,″

Pewee said in a frightened voice.

“Captain, what should we do?”

Gents spoke before Lloyd could.

″Lloyd, you're coming with me.″

“Alright. Sakata, you and Pee-wee search the area. All units, do not cut your radios under any circumstances.”

“Roger!”

The search began in pairs of two. ◆Shi.・,

But there was no response on the radar or sensors.

″That can't be right. There's no way they could have transported the bodies of so many soldiers in such a short time

in such a short time.″

Gents muttered.

Lloyd and Gents were making their way down to the basement: .・

“Got it, Gents.”

They smashed through the heavy steel door at the back. Lloyd looked inside and said,

“What?”

“Come take a look. They' ve already taken everything they needed.”

Gents ran over. .,: Ni・

The moment he peered inside,

“Damn it. Those bastards treat humans like nothing more than spare parts.”

He kicked the wall in a fit of rage.

Inside that room, hundreds of decomposing soldiers' bodies had been discarded. What' s more, every single one had its skull severed, and only the brains had been taken. "Damn it. It' s a bomb ″

"What?!"

″A time bomb has been set. One minute until detonation. It can't be defused!″! ' ″All units. Withdraw 1 · Gentsu, let' s get back." " " "–Two." ' However, Gentsu didn' t move.

He clasped his hands together and offered a silent prayer.

·Gentsu 1·"

″I know. If I die here, I won' t even be able to avenge these guys' grievances.″ Action. Retreat.

"Captain. Hurry, we' ve got fifteen seconds left."

Everyone had returned to the supply truck.

The moment Lloyd and Gents jumped aboard, it took off at breakneck speed. It navigated the narrow mountain road with skillful handling and hid in the shade of the trees. Boom–! Immediately, they were engulfed by a rumbling that shook the earth.

"It was designed so that if anyone stepped inside the factory, the bomb would automatically arm," Hans said.

"To blow witnesses and evidence to smithereens··· is that it?"

Gents said, his voice low and growling.

"Evidence? Did you find anything?" TJ asked.

Frederick asked.

Gents shook his head silently. It seemed he couldn' t put it into words.

Lloyd recounted what he had seen.

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"That' s awful,"

E-Hing said.

"My dad and my older brother did something like that ″

Sakata was speechless.

Yan clasped his hands together, facing the factory ruins that had been completely obliterated.

· "What are we going to do now? The Peacekeeping Forces are going to hunt you down as terrorists."

Gentsu asked Lloyd: -

"My mind was made up the moment we left town. Even if I' m alone, I won' t stop until I' ve destroyed Sakata Industries."

"It' s not 'my resolve,' it' s 'our resolve,' right?"

Sakata said. 2: ' ″But

″I can't just leave things as they are. My father and older brother's responsibilities are my responsibility too.″ It was a remark that sounded just like the stern Sakata. ·ヽ■
″We've been in this together ever since we left town,″ Yan said. ·'· Mo1 - 5 Eihin nodded in agreement.

He must have heard the conversation. Pee-wee honked the horn.

"In that case, we' re both on the run. Want to team up?"

"All right."

Lloyd shook Gents' outstretched right hand: ' .

"All right, it' s settled. Driver, head for Lupidis! Sakata is there." The horn honked once, and the supply truck pulled

away.

“But the Peacekeeping Forces must have seen through our move. They’ re probably lying in wait for us.” Frederick said anxiously.

Yan laughed.

“So, are you planning to desert the front lines again?” “

Frederick looked annoyed and

“That’ s not what I meant. I intend to stick with this until the very end,” and rolled up his sleeve. ; Top m’- ‘ “・ “Just kidding. You’ ve gotten a lot tougher since the first time we met.” Yan looked at Frederick. His eyes had a somewhat seductive gleam.

■Nsu stood in front of Yang,.;., 二 .

“I-I think that bomb from earlier was a time-delayed plastic explosive.”

Yang pushed Hans aside and

“So ”

he said, continuing to walk forward while staring at Frederick.

″Oh, for heaven’ s sake. Even in the midst of war, it’ s still the season of love for young people, I suppose.″ Gents spat out the words and lay down.

He must have been exhausted. Soon, muffled snoring echoed from inside his full-face helmet

# Chapter 30

“Stop the car!” –

On the way to Lupidis. Ni-cho: Suddenly, Hans shouted.

"What's wrong?"

**Lloyd, ^/¥o M**

"Power signature detected. It's close!"

"What?!"

The members, who had been lying down and taking a brief rest, all reacted at once. Pee-wee stopped the supply truck.

Lloyd peered out through the supply truck’ s window to check the situation outside. His expression changed instantly.

"T-this is "

“The former USN munitions factory in the old Larkas district. Though it’ s an abandoned factory now, of course.” Gents said, looking outside through the peephole next to him.
“So, a year ago…”

Sakata looked outside as well.

His expression was stiff.

“If I hadn’ t come here back then, this war—and Karen— ” Lloyd bit his lip.

Gents spoke quietly. “No. Even if you guys hadn’ t come here a year ago, the war would have happened anyway.”
“What?”

“This wasn’ t a USN military munitions factory. It was a BD factory
.”

“What ?"

“The battle you started here certainly triggered the Second Huffman Conflict. But · “A farce?” ^^^^^.^■ Lloyd and the others stared intently at Gents, waiting for him to continue. Gents took a bent cigarette out of his breast pocket. ;” He took a deep drag, then said, “The battle here was planned by Sakata Industries. Sakata Industries wanted a place to test the devices they’ d developed in actual combat. That’ s why they chose this place.” “So that was a field test for the devices…” Sakata groaned.

“With the ongoing tension between the two major factions, this island was the perfect fit for those conditions,” Gents said, exhaling a large puff of smoke.

Frederick nodded in agreement. ’·’.

“That’ s definitely what I found in my investigation. Lloyd and the others were merely used as ‘pawns’ to set things in motion—”

“What a filthy bunch,” Yan said, narrowing his eyes. Hans shouted, “It’ s dangerous. The power reaction is getting closer and closer.” “Everyone, board your Vantours. Prepare for combat!” Lloyd was the first to leap into his Vantour. In less than five seconds, he burst out of the supply vehicle. J’.’■ Immediately, a gigantic monster loomed before him: 匚.一’「 It stood in his way, resembling a giant elephant. He recognized it. It was a figure he could never forget, no matter how hard he tried . It was the same model as the Vantour he’ d encountered here a year ago. No, it was the very same one. “You—Driscoll!” “Heh heh heh. You’ ve finally arrived, Lloyd. I knew you’ d have to pass through here, so I’ ve been lying in wait.” Driscoll spoke calmly.---, - ■ “W-wait, that’ s a Seeking-type Vanzar! I-I can’ t believe they’ re actually deployed in combat!” Eihin cried out in surprise.

“You know about it?”

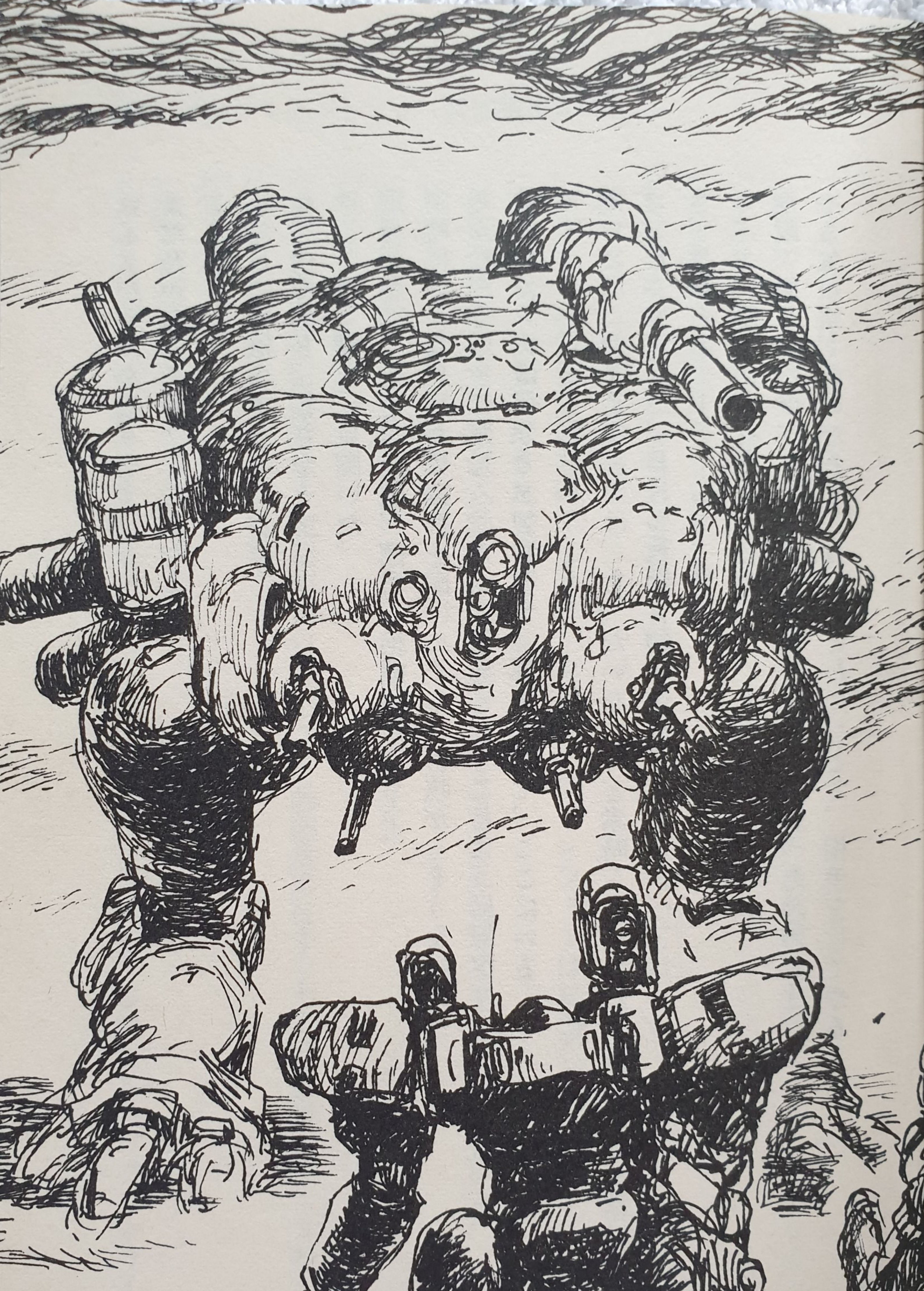
“It’ s a super-heavy combat Vantzer that Sakata Industries was developing in strict secrecy.” “With this, I’ ll get Karen ”

Lloyd’ s voice trembled with rage. 1 .’1 As if mocking him, Driscoll said.

“It feels familiar, doesn’ t it? You and I fought here. It’ s just like a year ago.” “No. A year ago ”

“Why? Sakata’ s here, and so is he,” “W-what? Karen’ s here—U” —· ■.■ —*· “Captain, it’ s a lie. Don’ t fall for it!” *, 1: Sakata shouts. ‘Ni-; J Driscoll burst out laughing.· “Hahaha. Unlike his cowardly older brother, the younger one’ s full of energy.” “’’I : “Damn it—” Sakata dashes forward. “No, don’ t. Don’ t take the bait.”

Yan grabs him in a headlock and pins him down. “Karen: : : ^^ They say she’ s here”



Lloyd managed to squeeze out a voice.

“Don’ t you get it yet? It’ s right here.” “Here!?”

“Inside my machine.” ...:^ “W-what? No way!” Lloyd’ s eyes widened. .:ニ Shock, suspicion, denial, hope, certainty, despair, rage^^. . .■・ A myriad of thoughts raced through his mind in an instant. It was enough to make him dizzy. 1 2 As if relishing his confusion and pouring even more hatred into it, Driscoll said, “That’ s right. Karen is here, as a Sakata Type B Device.” “Power Karen ″

″Karen is far too wonderful a woman for someone like you. With this computer—which has her brain transplanted into it—we can achieve our goal!″ Z * ″Y-you... ″Aaah!″

Lloyd’ s eyes blazed like a crimson inferno.

A leap. It was as if Vantour’ s entire body had burst into flames with rage. “You think you can take us on? Fine. Karen and I will be your opponents!”

Aiming for Lloyd. . ・ ▪ ▪ ■

The missile launcher on the Driscoll unit’ s shoulder spewed a whirlwind of flames.

One Karen ”

Lloyd screamed. ‘ Ni ・ If Karen is there. If she’ s still conscious. I want her to hear this. ■ But. As if to shatter that hope, Lloyd’ s Vantour was hit. Blown back a hundred meters, it crashed into an old warehouse. ’ “Be careful. It’ s large, but it moves three times faster than a standard Vantour.” Nizegi ” Sakata fires a Boa 40. Nini:

Hit in the head. It bounced back like a marble.: Kini.’..: - Voice “What a monster.” - “・ , V “Its weak point is the abdomen. The center of the abdomen should be almost completely unprotected. Attack there… Whoa, ouch!” A

missile hits Yi-hin directly. '　“Yi-hin!”

Yan rushes over. ·　“Heh heh heh. What that runaway rat said is true. However, that' s only if your Vantour

under my command.″

″Spread out. Create confusion!″

Lloyd runs.

His legs were damaged in the earlier barrage, slowing him down.

“No matter where they attack from, Karen will sense the Vantour' s movements and strike. You' ll be taken down by your old comrades. I' m sure that' s exactly what you want.”

Driscoll laughed with the utmost glee. With a tone that was utterly cruel. .But. Just as he said.·」」 . 1 The countless turrets mounted on the hull fired precisely at the Vantour^-.- Closing in is impossible. We can' t even counterattack. We' re doing our absolute best just to dodge Driscoll' s attacks. 1 And even if we managed to counterattack, our shots would simply be bounced off the thick hull.

—At this rate, all we can do is wait to die.

Beads of cold sweat formed on Lloyd' s forehead. .Anini■Nini^^^^ But he couldn' t risk his life.

If I destroy that Van Tour, Karen... Karen will disappear　.　“I' m done for. This is hopeless. I can' t move. I' m pulling out.”

Frederick said.

“Damn it, my leg' s completely destroyed.”

Yan' s Vanzar rolled while counterattacking. It was immediately hit by a shell and sent flying.

″Captain, if this keeps up　″

Sakata shouted.

The Boa 40 was running out of ammunition. ;■ ▪

″Sis, cover me. I'm going to slip underneath.″; 1 2:

Eihin circles around.

He' s immediately hit by a shell and blown away. ;' "■·
Gentsu moves around to the other side. A shell is fired precisely at the turret, striking his left arm. . "Damn it. My left arm' s gone."

His right arm is damaged too, barely hanging on. His only means of attack is the spare flamethrower he was carrying, the "Hot Dog" —.

Just as a thunderstorm suddenly stops, the explosions and flashes vanished: ■ Driscoll had ceased his attack. ■
"It' s about time. The fun is over. I' m a busy man, after all."

"Not yet. I' ll fight until I die."

Gentsu laughed defiantly.

"Is that so? But rest assured. I may kill your body, but I' ll take your brain back and regenerate it." "In that case, when I die, I' ll shove a lead bullet into my own head so that even if you take it back, it' ll be good for nothing more than miso soup."

"Hahaha. You lot never learn. That was fun."

The gun turrets of the giant Vantours move silently 0 .

The sights lock onto each of the Vantours. ;: , Sakata murmurs.

"Karen "

Lloyd whispered under his breath

Just before Driscoll' s turret opened fire.

A dull explosion echoed once. .:.^ ; Right beneath Driscoll—

“Piuu—!! Go

Pewee, riding a small motorcycle, was firing a bazooka straight up into the air. ■ “H-hey, everyone, hurry up and take them out!”

Pewee screamed in a tearful voice.

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Chaff It seems he went unnoticed because he was completely covered by a sheet scattered with fine metal fragments.

"XX, XX—"

Hit in its weak spot by the unexpected attack, the giant Vantour came to a halt.

"Attack!"

・ Lloyd,

The battered Vanzers swarm in like ants. .^^^pw ・

, fired its remaining weapons all at once

The shells ripped through the Seeking-type Vanzer’ s soft underbelly.

It spewed fire and black smoke.

"Fall back!"

The Vanzers that had slipped inside scatter like a swarm of spiders. (—

"Well done, Pui "

"Saka-yaan!"

Piwi clung to Sakata’ s Vantour.

Sakata carried Piwi and retreated.

“　　″Remember this, Lloyd,″

Dosukore muttered.

″I'll tell you a story that's been passed down for ages. 'In battle, overconfidence creates openings and leads to defeat,'″

″Hmm, one thing...″

“Small crimes are forgiven in exchange for great deeds. That’ s the lesson I learned from *Crime and Punishment*.” Driscoll smiled quietly. --

″Driscoll, you　　!”

Lloyd growled.

Driscoll said triumphantly

“Mark my words. You lot were gathered here for the same purpose as Karen. We won’ t let you get away　.″

Flames erupted from every part of the giant Vantour. ;'': 1

“Chikara, Karen, I’ m coming to save you now!”

Lloyd dashed　Without a moment’ s hesitation, he dives into the flames

″Captain—″

″I'll be right back.″

He slips inside through the hole in his abdomen.

″Oh no. It's going to explode!″

“Captain Lloyd~!”　· Pee-wee, who had been crying nonstop, cried out. At that very moment, the Seeking-type Vantour turned into a massive fireball. Riding the blast, Lloyd’ s Vantour leaped forward. It rolled along, skimming the ground.

″Captain　!″

Sakata ran toward Lloyd.

Lloyd’ s Van Tour slowly stood up. He was clutching something dearly.

“That’ s-!”

Sakata stopped mid-sentence. ;:Hmm- ,; Lloyd nodded once,

″It's Karen,″

she said.

The computer she had brought out with a death-defying resolve.

It was clearly labeled “Karen Device BD-6 Kr.” “Pewee. Can you… attach Karen-this computer-to my unit?” When Lloyd asked him this, Pewee wiped away his tears. She looked over the computer: “Yeah. The specs seem to be the same, so I think it’ s possible… but still.” Lloyd stared at the computer in his hands. Then, in a hushed voice, he muttered.

″Karen. Let’ s go together. It all started with us. So let’ s end it all with our own hands ″

# Chapter 31

The former USN military office in Fort Monas had become the office of the peacekeeping forces after the ceasefire. ■
 “Just the other day, I was killing the very people who were holding meetings in this room. Seriously, it’ s a war where you can’ t tell friend from foe.” Keith said.

“That’ s just how war is,”

JJ said. . Natalie was silent. She stared at the desk in front of her, lost in thought. There were only three people in the room. .’ ,12., ■ ■ ■ It was Olson. He didn’ t try to come inside.

Standing by the door, she said: ■Nini; :;;- ″We've received intelligence that the Yats have appeared at an arms dealer's camp on a mountainside 150 kilometers north-northeast of Lupidis.″ · · 1 ■ Natalie looked up. She looked at Olson. “-—· “It seems they were the ones who caused the commotion in the Lakas District as well.” “You’ re going to make up for letting them get away, Natalie.” “……Yes, Colonel.” .
 “Take command of the unit and depart immediately.” ; 2, 27 Olson left the room immediately. Natalie once again lowered her gaze to her empty desk.

“Hey, Keith. Are you sure this is really okay?”

JJ said, looking a bit dazed.

“What’ s with you now? That’ s not like you at all.”

“Three.” ”

“You were here because you hate things that don’ t make money, right?” -Ichi “Well, that’ s true.”

“Then shut up.”

Natalie stood up° · 12:x: -

"I' m leaving."

She said nothing more and walked out of the room.

Keith got up.

"Yeah." JJ also reluctantly got up.

"At this rate, we' ll be in Lupidis in less than an hour," Hans said. "It' s finally time for the showdown with Sakata. I' m going to rest up."

Gents flopped down on his side.

Just then. A sudden brake.

Gents was thrown forward by the recoil and automatically stood up.

The others were either falling over or losing their balance.

"What the hell? That's some rough driving." ;:-二. "Pewee, are you hungry or something?"

But there was no reply from Piu-i.

Instead, a woman' s voice came over the radio-:

"This is the Peacekeeping Force. To the terrorists: Exit the vehicle and surrender." Tension ran through the supply truck. ., · "That's Natalie's voice,"

Sakata shouts.

"W-what the hell?"

Yang looked at Lloyd.

Lloyd said nothing. Instead, Eihin spoke.-. : :

"There' s no question of what to do—I don' t want to fight her."

"But if they attack us, we won' t be able to just say we don' t want to."

Yang snapped at him. ·

Then, Natalie’ s voice rang out.

″If you do not comply with our warning, we will commence our attack. If you do not comply with our warning ＞ “I’ ll tell them the truth” :

Frederick ran toward the radio. , ·–■♦ Lloyd stopped him. Go-cho 1, · “I’ ll talk.” ^^^^^^ – Lloyd did not head for the radio. He headed for the exit of the supply truck. Without getting into the Van Tour, he went out unprotected. Once outside, Lloyd walked toward the Van Tour standing ahead. “Captain Lloyd”

Pewee, in the driver’ s seat, called out to him. ,– =: Near 1 “Turn off the engine. Stay here and wait.”

Lloyd gave the order. Then he simply started walking.

Three Van Tours.

Natalie in the center. Keith on the left. And JJ on the right.

“You’ re surrendering, aren’ t you?”

Natalie said.

Lloyd looked up at Natalie’ s Vantour. He shook his head.

″Lloyd ″

Natalie raised the shotgun on her right arm, the “Cat’ s Ray.”

She aimed the muzzle at Lloyd.

Everything froze. It was as if even time had stopped.』; ■ · “I won’ t surrender,” Lloyd said.

But Natalie didn’ t move. ■ˆ–:

″What’ s wrong, Natalie?″

A radio transmission came from Olson: :. ; “·.一 “·Pe^
〈Shoot. Kill the traitor!〉 『, 一二 Natalie didn’ t answer.
Hurry!〉 ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Oreson shouted

Instead of answering, a cat’ s tail fell from Natalie’ s right arm ■ “Natalie- ″

Keith muttered.

″It's my power, I ″

· Her voice was choked with tears. “...■″: :-’2 〈Natalie. Are you planning to betray me too!〉

“I’ ve had enough of this!”

Natalie screamed. Making no attempt to hold back her tears

“I’ ve been betraying you all along. But I can’ t do it anymore. I can’ t betray my comrades any further. I can’ t betray myself any further!” · “You wretch, Natalie! You’ ve brought shame upon me!” * · Natalie jumped off the Van Tour. Two: “Keith. That’ s an unexpected turn of events,” JJ said. “Is that so? I had a feeling something like this might happen,” Keith said. He got off the Van Tour.

″Well, I guess so.″

JJ also got out of the van.

The crew from the supply truck had also rushed over.

″I'm glad it turned out this way,″

Pewee said to Keith.

″Pfft. What can you do? It’ s only natural for subordinates to follow their commander’ s orders.″

Keith glanced at Natalie.

Natalie stood directly in front of Lloyd and, staring at him, said,

“You aren’ t the traitors. I was.”

“Natalie.”

“I became the second-in-command of the ‘Canyon Crow’ to keep an eye on you all. I was ordered to do so by my father and Olson.” ◆ “Your father?” Yan asked. “No,”

“I am Natalie Blakewood. I am General Willas Blakewood’ s daughter .”

“What?!” Keith exclaimed in surprise.

“And… from the very beginning. I knew you were candidates for the B-Device material, and I kept it hidden. I knew everything—about Driscoll, about Karen, everything.”
“That’ s enough,”

Lloyd stopped her. -1.-(^

Natalie wouldn’ t stop

“No. I’ m the one who should be killed. I’ ve been betraying my comrades all along . Do whatever you want with me. Whatever satisfies you!″

No one moves. · “In that case ″

Natalie’ s right hand moves. “Ni:*’ ヽ - : Before she knew it, she was clutching a pistol. Ichi- ” She points it at her own head. :,1- “Natalie -

Keith shouts.

Lloyd’ s right foot flies out. His toes kick the pistol.

The pistol flew through the air in a parabolic arc.

Pewee hurriedly went to pick it up. Hiding it behind his back, he shook his head violently at Natalie. “I…”

Natalie knelt down. She bowed her head. c Lloyd reached out his hand. L.

“Lloyd ”

"It's all right now."

“But…”

"Will you come with me?"

"Eh, Lloyd

“The chances of surviving from here on out are slim. Still, if you’ d like…” “Thank you. Thank you, Lloyd.”

Natalie took Lloyd’ s hand. With his support, she stood up. Wiping away her tears, a dazzling smile spread across her face.

"So, that means everyone in Canyon Crow needs to gather up,"

Keith said.

"Hey, Pee-wee. I'm hungry. Feed me something,"

JJ said.

Pewee shook his head frantically and said,

“There’ s no food… nothing…”

But he stopped shaking his head midway

"I guess I have no choice. There’ s just one hamburger left that I saved for a late-night snack, so I’ ll share it with you,"

he said reluctantly.

Rice crackers

“Hey! Forget the hamburger—there’ s rice crackers, caramel, hardtack, canned cola, snacks, and chocolate all over the

place next to the driver's seat!" Hans shouted.

"Ah, no, no, no, no! That's my emergency rations!" Pee-wee's face turned pale, his belly jiggled, and he dashed off. For the first time in a while, cheerful laughter erupted.

# Chapter 32

Lupidis, the premier port town on Huffman Island, was about to welcome dusk. Over a hundred warehouses lined the streets in a grid-like pattern. Near the quay was an unpaved square. ■ Scrap materials and waste were scattered haphazardly across the soil rich in minerals.. ■ In one corner. ■ ■ ^^'L- A large supply truck was hidden beneath a tattered tarp.

“T-the security guards are coming!”

Pewee, who had been peeking outside through a gap in the tarp, said in a frightened voice. The security company, Vantour, was approaching, searching every single warehouse. Even at a quick glance, there were at least ten of them.

“Looks like they’ re the guys hired by Sakata Industries,” said Hans, who had been intercepting the radio transmissions. “Sakata probably knows we’ re coming here, of course.”

Frederick muttered.

“So we’ ve walked right into a trap, have we?” Keith quickly climbed into the Vantour.

Gents, however, spoke calmly.

“What? No need to worry. As you can see, Lupidis is the largest port on this island. We can easily hide ten or twenty Vantours here.”

At that carefree remark, Yan said, looking exasperated. ″Gosh.″

″Seriously, you're just winging it.″

“Ahh, they’ re getting closer.”

Pewee’ s legs trembled. ·

″Everyone. Board the Vantours. Stand by!″ ″One; Two.″

Lloyd said.

"What should I do?"

Pewee tugged at Lloyd’s sleeve.

“I’ll wait here.”

"But ”

Patting Pee-wee’s shoulder as he looked on fearfully, Lloyd addressed the team.

"Take them down fast. Guns will give us away. Stick to hand-to-hand combat."

"So, that means it’s my turn, huh?"

Keith, riding in the Van Tour, raised his hand rod.

“I usually don’t get involved in fights that don’t pay, though.” ■

JJ said, “Huh.”

Keith replied. 1

"It won't even take thirty seconds. It won't even count as a warm-up, let alone a fight."

"Let's go."

Lloyd's voice—.

In the order of Keith, JJ, Lloyd, Sakata, and Yang, the Van Tour took off.

Not thirty seconds, but just thirteen seconds later: Hand 1:

The fifteen security Vash Tours were wiped out before they even had a chance to call for backup.”

“Pewee. It’s over.”

Keith says.

“Sakata, Keith, JJ. Gather the security Vantours and hide them under the seats. The rest of you, hurry up and find the warehouse in the sky.”

″Yeah, yeah. Even without pay, you’ re still just as tough as ever, Captain.″

“Oh no. A car’ s coming!” Frederick shouted. A car with its headlights off was approaching down the deserted road. “I’ ll handle this.” Keith’ s VanTour sped off. “W-wait a minute. It’ s the radio!” Two: Hans hurriedly relayed the signal he’ d picked up to the other VanTours. “Hey, Lloyd. Is that you guys?”

“That voice!”

JJ exclaimed. “Don’ t attack!” Lloyd stopped Keith. The car came to a stop in front of Lloyd and the others. A man got out. It was Dr. Brown.

″I knew it!″

JJ said happily.

“-^-Kuta-. -XJ, how’ d you end up here?” Lloyd asked.

“I just happened to end up in this town, and I heard you guys were heading this way.”

“Damn. Has the word spread that far?!” Keith clutched his head.

“Don’ t worry. I know a safe warehouse. Follow me.” Dr. Brown said that and got into the car. Eihin asked suspiciously,

“Can we trust him?”

“He didn’ t seem to be in radio contact with the enemy…” Hans said.

“Lloyd, what are we going to do?” Yang asked. JJ answered for Lloyd. “Don’ t worry, the Doctor is trustworthy.” Lloyd agreed.

″All right. Everyone, get in the supply vehicles. Pee-wee, follow the Doctor’ s car—·ҳ

# Chapter 33

The sun had already set. –

Scattered streetlights cast a dim glow over the row of warehouses. Beside one of the dilapidated warehouses stood a large vehicle. It was parked in a spot where the streetlights didn' t reach, as if to hide its presence in the darkness. The interior lights were also turned off. – But it wasn' t unoccupied?

Two figures could be seen in the driver' s and passenger' s seats.

"The terrorists should be arriving any minute now."

The man in the driver' s seat spoke. It was Olson' s voice. I; 1: '=', ■' The man in the passenger seat didn' t answer. Ni1: Once again, Olson broke the silence. '厂 : : "Are you unhappy about the joint operation with the USN? Or is it about your daughter "

"Refrain from unnecessary chatter,"

The man in the passenger seat said, as if scolding him. It was Blakewood' s voice.

Olson ignored him. In a provocative tone that hardly seemed appropriate for addressing a superior,

"General. Please do not forget that we have a duty to the International Peacekeeping Organization regarding this matter."

But Breakwood, as if suppressing his emotions, replied, "I know."

"I know,"

he muttered, as if suppressing his emotions.

A spot in the warehouse ahead flashed brightly. -.;>^^ ;;

“It seems they’ ve arrived.”

“General, please rest here. I’ ll take the VanTour and get direct orders myself-” Olson quietly got out of the car. .-

The Van Tour was parked in the darkness right behind him. He climbed in.

“Natalie- ″■2 W- ’ ..・ヽ ・Breakwood, who remained in the car, muttered as if in anguish.

Brown stopped the car in front of an old warehouse.

Standing at the warehouse entrance, he pulled open the iron door. ; 1;-’■ It wasn’ t locked. With a creaking sound, the door swung open.

“This is the place.”

He signaled to the supply truck parked behind them. They got back in the car and drove into the warehouse. :;;;;-’:.-:.,; The supply truck followed behind.

“An old acquaintance of mine lives in this town and let me use this empty warehouse. Of course, I didn’ t tell him what I was going to use it for, so there’ s no need to worry.” : ー ー二L . Brown said this as he closed the door behind him.

″But it's pitch black. And the air's pretty bad, too,″ Keith said. His voice echoed through the warehouse.

In response, a voice several times louder rang out. ・ー –ー

“Let’ s at least make it a little brighter.”

″That voice-it’ s Olson!″

“No way H″ Intense lights shone down from all sides.

“We’ re completely surrounded,”

Natalie shouted.

Nearly fifty Vantours were surrounding them.

″Damn it, it' s a trap.″

Keith leaped onto a Vantour. Ke

″Doctor. You didn' t sell us out, did you?″ Frederick shouted.

"Don' t be ridiculous. That' s unthinkable."

Brown is even more flustered than Canyon Crow.

″He' s innocent. But using the phone to contact us was a mistake,″ said P. Olson. 1; ″Damn it, were we being tapped? I' m sorry, I never thought it would come to this " Brown apologized.

"Sakata, protect the doctor. Spread out—we' ll be picked off one by one." Lloyd used his Tweige rifle to destroy the lights. —A roar. Once again, they were enveloped in pitch-black darkness.

A wave of panic swept through the enemy Vanzers. -;-

Through the darkness, the Canyon Crow raced forward.

This was a mercenary unit that had survived countless battles.

Relying solely on the faint sensor signals emitted by the enemy, they systematically took out one unit at a time. A panicked enemy Vanzar fired a missile.

They hit one of their own Vanzers. It burst into flames.

″You idiots! Don't you know the basics of indoor combat?!″

Olson shouted.

"Maybe it would' ve been better for us to train with the regular army instead of getting involved with the Canyon Crows."

Keith laughed.

“Signalsman. Call for reinforcements.”

Olson shouted.

″Roger that ″Ugh, whoa!″

Signalsman Vantsa’ s body was shattered. :■- It wasn’ t the work of Canyon Crow.

A large vehicle has appeared by the warehouse door, which had opened at some point. A shotgun mounted on that vehicle fired a targeted shot.

″General. What ″

Olson’ s eyes widened^

Breakwood replied firmly,

“There’ s no need to call for reinforcements

“What on earth is going on here!?”

Breakwood did not answer Olson’ s question,

″Lloyd. It's me. It's Blakewood. I'm here to support you,″ he declared.

“General!”

“Father ″

“You bastard, Breakwood, you betrayed me!” H'(:) Olson’ s Van Tour leapt forward. — It charged straight toward the vehicle Breakwood was riding in. ‘Natalie blocked its path.’

“Natalie. After all I’ ve done for you, do you dare defy me?” Olson growled.

Natalie didn’ t answer. Instead, the C-Ray on her right arm spewed fire.

With a single strike, she destroyed Olson’ s right arm. Finally, she spoke. .1; ■ “It’ s a shame you’ re the one getting to see my honed skills,” she said with intense sarcasm. ^^^^^’^^^-’ Olson’ s face froze in rage. His cheeks twitched into a twisted grin, “·

“What a pity. You two could have become the strongest devices! One

Natalie’ s eyes widened,

“W-well then, I’ ll ″

“That’ s right. I was planning to modify you along with Lloyd and the others ″Ugh!″ Catsray pierced the center of her body. ■ O- II’ ″You betrayed everything. · You’ re a true coward.″’ ″Natalie said, filled with hatred.

“Heh heh heh. Everything. From the very beginning, I’ ve sworn loyalty to nothing but my homeland.”

“Homeland!?”

The very term “homeland” has long since become obsolete, both in the OCU and the USN.

“Olson, what on earth ″

“Natalie, and Lloyd. No matter who dies, this plan will not end. Heh heh heh, ha ha ha.

“Dangerous!”

Keith lunges at Natalie.

At the same moment, the van carrying Olson blew itself up. Ha: “Everyone, hurry! Sakata is trying to leave this island, fearing an attack from you lot,” Blakewood shouted. -’’

“What?!”

Sakata asked in response.

″They're planning to escape by boat from Deck 16.″ 1;.-″ 1;″

But the remaining enemy Vantours are fighting for their lives, too.- There' s no opening to slip through. "7 2 ・ 2 Plus, with Olson down, they' re all losing their minds. 'You traitor!' —■12 A missile flies toward Breakwood. Natalie threw herself onto the car, Vantzer and all. The missile hit her in the back. The body was completely destroyed. ■◆ ■■■ 'Let' s finish this.'

Keith crawled forward and took down the Vanzar that fired the missile with a single blow.

"Natalie H"

Breakwood opens the car door.

"It's dangerous. Father, stay inside."

Natalie stopped him: Ni Ni

"But "

"I' ll be fine. If I can' t handle something like this, I wouldn' t be fit to be the deputy of Canyon Crow."

"Natalie—"

"But why, Father?"

"……■ ■—M—

"Why, when he swore such loyalty to the military?"

"I don' t know myself. But ::L1 Natalie waited for her father to speak. : —.- Blakewood looked up at Natalie' s Van Tour through the window and said, "But something is wrong. I just feel it."

"Father "

Natalie' s Vantour hugged the car tightly. Just like a daughter clinging to her father

"Enemy forces, wiped out!" .

“Free labor, complete.”

Keith and JJ said.

Lloyd asks. '♦■; — NiF · Everyone looks around. Yan shouts...

"Sakata' s not here!"

"What?!"

“Come to think of it, he slipped past me during the battle and dashed outside, didn' t he?” JJ said, as if recalling the moment. * “Sakata deserted the front lines !?” - 2

“I can' t believe it.”

“Hans. Have you heard anything from Sakata?”

Lloyd asked.

“Hold on a sec.”

Hans operated the sensors.

"There it is! It's heading toward the harbor at full speed."

"What?"

"That "

Pewee came into the warehouse. ■■ It seems he had slipped outside without anyone noticing. 1-2 “I wasn' t . I was guarding the supply truck out there. Even Dr. Brown was safe because I put him in the truck.” Chi' ichi “I see. So?” Ni11♦ Lloyd urged him to continue.

“Saka-yan was running off, so I asked, ‘Where are you going?’ and he said, ‘I' m going to settle things with my dad and my older brother.’ ”

“Wait, so—”

“Oh, so he went in there all by himself?” “Gah…”

"Pfft, what on earth is he going to talk about at this

point?″

″Flying a single, battered Vanzar right into the heart of the enemy...″ :'.:

″Could he be planning to die? U - 1■

“All units, hurry to Dock 16!”

Lloyd’ s Vanzar took the lead and dashed forward.

# Chapter 34

A single ship lay in Dock 16. Its anchor was already raised, ready to set sail at any moment. .ˆ◆″, Ni. A vehicle raced toward the open rear hatch. ■◆ Just as it was about to drive onto the hatch, the vehicle came to a stop on the concrete of the dock. ″Wh-what' s going on, Chairman?″

Koichi, who was driving, asked Reiji in the passenger seat.

Reiji didn' t answer; he just got out of the car:

"Are you feeling sick or something?"

Koichi got out of the car as well.

They stood facing each other across the car: : Reiji remained silent.

"Don' t worry. The Development Headquarters was originally on Long Reverse Island anyway, so we can continue with the plan. More importantly, let' s get on the ship ."

Koichi glances around. His demeanor is becoming increasingly agitated.

Staring intently at Koichi, Reiji muttered.

"Let' s just stop this."

″Huh? What did you just say?″

"Koichi. We' re canceling this project. It' s all a failure."

″What are you talking about, Chairman? Research on the Type B device is nearly complete. And once the Type S currently under development is finished—″

"But weren' t both the Type B and Type S devices developed by you and that country on your own initiative?"

"Are you suggesting that using the brains of artificially cultured fetuses is more humane than using adult brains?"

“Ridiculous. Our technology has already surpassed the hand of God. What more is there to fear?”

“Everything was wrong. It’ s only now, at my age, that I’ ve finally realized it. I didn’ t notice it while I was pursuing this myself, but seeing you, I finally understood. Everything was .”

“What are you ″

Reiji took Koichi’ s words

“I’ m going to reveal everything to the world.”

“Chairman” :

″You, that country, and my own mistakes to the world.”

“It’ s too late now, Dad.”

How many years had it been since Koichi had called his father that?

“Koichi. It’ s not just you—I was the one who was wrong. I’ m the one who made you play this devilish game!”

“No. It’ s no good, Dad.”

“It may indeed be too late, but it’ s still possible to stop the plan and thwart that country’ s ambitions.”

“No. It’ s no good—,-

Reiji gasped. ″：, ,.; · ·■

Koichi’ s hand was clutching a gun.

″It’ s no good, Dad. We’ ve already gone too far to turn back now.″ Tears spilled from Koichi’ s eyes.

They ran down his cheeks and chin. When they fell to the ground with a soft plop, a dry sound echoed through the area.

Reiji stared at Koichi, his eyes wide.

“Dad, Koichi—!”

Sakata’ s cry rang out.

“Ryū, Ryūji ”

Reiji groaned.

“Goodbye, Dad.”

Koichi got into the car, leaving Reiji behind. 1. With a sudden burst of speed, he boards the ship. The hatch closes, and the ship sets sail. 2.

″Dad!″ :·

Sakata, having gotten out of the van, rushed over to Reiji, who was lying on the ground.

Blood spreading from his chest stained the concrete a dark red.

“Dad, pull yourself together. Dad!”

“Ryuji, it’ s been a while.”

Reiji looked up at Sakata and smiled.

“Dad, don’ t talk anymore. We’ re taking you to the hospital right now.” Sakata wrapped his arms around Reiji’ s body. “No. Put me down.” Reiji pushed Sakata away. “I’ m done for.More importantly, Ryuji. Come see me.″ ″I’ ve done a foolish thing. I risked my life to bring misery upon humanity. It’ s foolish of me to realize this only now, on the brink of death...″ ″But he hasn’ t realized it yet.″ Reiji clenched Sakata’ s hand.1st Factory: “Ryuji. Koichi has headed for Long Reverse Island. The development headquarters is underground.” -.. “I’ m counting on you to take over from here.” Ryu “Dad, Dad—!” Sakata’ s scream echoed sadly across the harbor. When Lloyd and the others rushed to Dock 16.

■The ship had set sail and was nowhere to be seen. There was no sign of the enemy either. ■Only Sakata remained, holding his father’ s body.

# Chapter 35

A single ship lay in Dock 16. Its anchor was already raised, ready to set sail at any moment. .ˆ◆″, Ni. A vehicle raced

"Let' s go, Captain."

Sakata stood up. Shini 3- J

Carrying his father' s body, he walked toward Brown.

″Doctor, please look after my father for a while. I' ll be back to pick him up soon.″ ″Understood.″

He laid his father' s body on the back seat of Brown' s car. 1

"Dad, I' m going." #Do.w "–.' "■. A moment of silent prayer.''.Go ◆ ,;" '" He stood in front of Lloyd.

He looked him straight in the eye and said.

"Sakata Industries' R&D headquarters is on Long River Island. Koichi Sakata is heading there right now. Let' s go, Captain!"

He was different from Lloyd. Yet, he possessed a passion that rivaled Lloyd' s.

"Understood, Sakata."

Lloyd looked back at Sakata and nodded firmly.

"The military helicopter I arrived in is at the helipad at the far end of the dock. You should use that. But the pilot…"

Breakwood' s voice trailed off.

Pewee wiped away his tears and said,

"Leave it to me. I can fly not just cars, but helicopters and planes too."

“General, what about you?”

Frederick asked.

“I’ m staying here.”

“But, Father ″

Natalie ran over.

“Don’ t worry. Choosing to side with you was my own decision. Natalie, you

″Father ”

Breakwood looked away from his daughter. 2」ー丶-^^^^

“Lloyd, I’ m counting on you to look after my daughter.”

“Understood. …All aircraft, proceed directly to the heliport. We’ re flying to Long Reverse Island.” ■

“Roger!”

The entire Canyon Crow crew responded in unison: ; Go - ,

# Chapter 36

"I have been ordered by headquarters to eliminate you."

An eerie voice echoed through the area. · Nimo"■■' J

"Wait, wait a minute. The problem with the B Device can be resolved immediately—it's just a matter of adjusting the accelerator and the psychoresist."

Koichi shouted, his face pale with panic.

"There's no need for that anymore. Now that the S Device is complete."

"B-but our company manufactured that S-type, too!"

"No. It was developed by my homeland, the Republic of Zaftora. Sakata Industries merely built the prototype."

"W-what "

"In the end, you simply couldn't build something that met our requirements."

His voice was cold and dismissive.

"H-help me. I beg you. Look at me!" ◆*ー'く.;

Koichi, casting aside all shame and dignity, threw himself to the ground in supplication.

"Hahaha. What a pathetic creature. Do you really want to live that badly?" ·

"I'll do anything. Just spare my life…"

"I'll give you one last chance. Canyon Crow is on his way here."

"W-What?"

"Use that Grooning you developed to kill Lloyd. If you do, I'll consider the Type B Device a success and spare your

life.”

“Kill Lloyd ″

″Will you do it? Or do you want to die right now? There are two paths—but only one choice.″

“O-okay. I’ ll do it. I’ ll kill Lloyd.”

″In that case, I’ ll take my time observing you. Heh heh heh, ha ha ha ha ha ” It was a laugh that rubbed the listener the wrong way.

“I can’ t believe there was a facility like this underground on Long Reverse Island.” — Hans looked around.

″I guess that’ s why they were able to build such a massive base here—because no humans could get in,″ JJ said. 1. Long River Island, covered in lush nature. ·■ Designated as a nature reserve, it is off-limits to the public. ;; This was the interior of a secret factory built beneath it. 1. Countless steel pillars, each easily over a meter in diameter, stood on the vast, open floor. The distance between the steel pillars was no more than ten meters. I· Visibility was extremely poor. ; There was no sign of anyone. - It was deathly quiet.

“That’ s strange. They must know we’ re coming after them.” “It might be a trap,”

Eihin said.

“Yeah. It’ s a possibility.”

Yang’ s expression hardened. ^^^^^^ ″All units. Maintain combat readiness.″ ;. ; 2..’5 Lloyd said. · l All units advance slowly. ″ ″Oh my ＞ ◆ I thought I saw a shadow among the iron pillars ahead tremble faintly. · Sakata, who was leading the way, stared intently at the pillars. Sure enough,

the shadow moved. ; ■ It was the muzzle of a gun. It was aimed at Lloyd.

"Captain, danger!" ~ "

Sakata dashed forward.

A burst of flame erupted from the muzzle—! Lloyd dodged it at the last second. Sakata circled around the steel pillar. Enemy Vantour spotted. It is an upgraded version of the standard Vantour.

He fired a burst from the machine gun mounted on his right arm, the “R-Assou SP.” Keith rushed in and destroyed the leg with his “F-4 Hand Rod.” JJ swooped down and drove the Notasla Claw into the head and the elbow of the arm. Any ordinary Vantour would have been destroyed in a single blow. But despite its massive deformation, it barely retained its original form. “Tough bastard,” Noj said, standing directly in front of it and aiming his rifle, the “Aivis 111.” “W-wait!” the enemy Vantour shouted.

“Don’t worry. I’ll put you out of your misery right away.”

JJ aimed at the center of its body. The enemy Van Tour was too terrified to move a muscle. “Wait!” Sakata stepped in front of JJ, looking tense. “What’s wrong, Sakata?”

JJ lowered his guard.

Sakata didn’t answer that; instead, he shouted at the enemy Vantour, “Big Brother ?”

″Ryu, Ryuji!″

″It really is you, big brother!″

“Help me, Ryuji. Don’t kill me!”

The Van Tour that Koichi was riding in dropped its weapons at its feet and knelt down.

He prostrated himself in a pitifully wretched manner.

Sakata looked down at him with a conflicted expression and

“Big brother. Why did you kill Dad—!?” he muttered. Koichi immediately looked up and said, “I—I was just doing what they told me to do,” trying to explain himself.

“ ‘Those guys’?”

“Who do you mean by ‘them’?”

Lloyd asked.

“The Republic of Zaftora.”

“What!?”

“The Republic of Zaftora, in order to restore its weakened national power, ordered Sakata Industries to develop that device and turned Huffman Island into a testing ground !”

It tore through the air

A huge hole had been torn in Koichi’s Vantour’s body. —Kou

“A massive amount of blood began to pour out from it. .

“Big bro!”

Sakata rushed over.

A faint voice could be heard.

“Ryuji, I made a mistake…”

“Big bro, big bro ”

Sakata wanted to hear the rest of what he was saying.

But he would never hear Koichi’ s voice again:'':

"Big bro

Sakata stared at his brother, who didn’ t move a muscle.

"His shoulders trembled slightly as he muttered in a strained voice."

“I can’ t forgive them. The people who drove my father and my brother mad, and then took them away—I’ ll never…”

“There’ s an enemy. Be careful.”

Lloyd shouted.

Each of the Vantours took cover behind the iron pillars.

But only Sakata remained, leaning over his fallen brother’ s Vantour. “Sakata. It’ s dangerous here.”

Lloyd ran over.

“There’ s no need to hide. I just finished him off because I was done with him.” An eerie voice echoed, shaking the entire massive basement. “Ah… Look at that!”

Eihin pointed to the far end of the floor.

“W-what? That… that tasteless thing?”

Yang cried out.

At the far end of the floor, a massive statue of a lion, crafted from alloy, towered over them. It was nearly fifty meters tall.

"Its surface is crisscrossed with countless wires, like muscles." Its eyes shone with a sharp brilliance, as if it were alive.

“That’ s an incredible power response,” ... One...

Hans said.

“Does that thing move?”

JJ asked.

As if in response, the lion’ s eyes burned red.

A streak of crimson light pierced JJ’ s Vanzar.

Before he could even scream, JJ collapsed.

^—TJIJIC

Keith hides the motionless JJ behind a steel pillar. “ ·Keith My money... to my family back home ” Those were JJ’ s last words. ;■ With the suddenness of flipping off a light switch, JJ was dead. “JJ, you’ ve got to be kidding me. Don’ t mess with me. There’ s no way you’ re dead. Right, JJ? J TJ TJTJ —・-

Keith hugged JJ’ s Van Tour and let out repeated screams. “Hahaha. Bad luck. I was just proving that I can move.” The super-alloy lion monster bared its fangs.

“You Surely not, Driscoll 17 Go

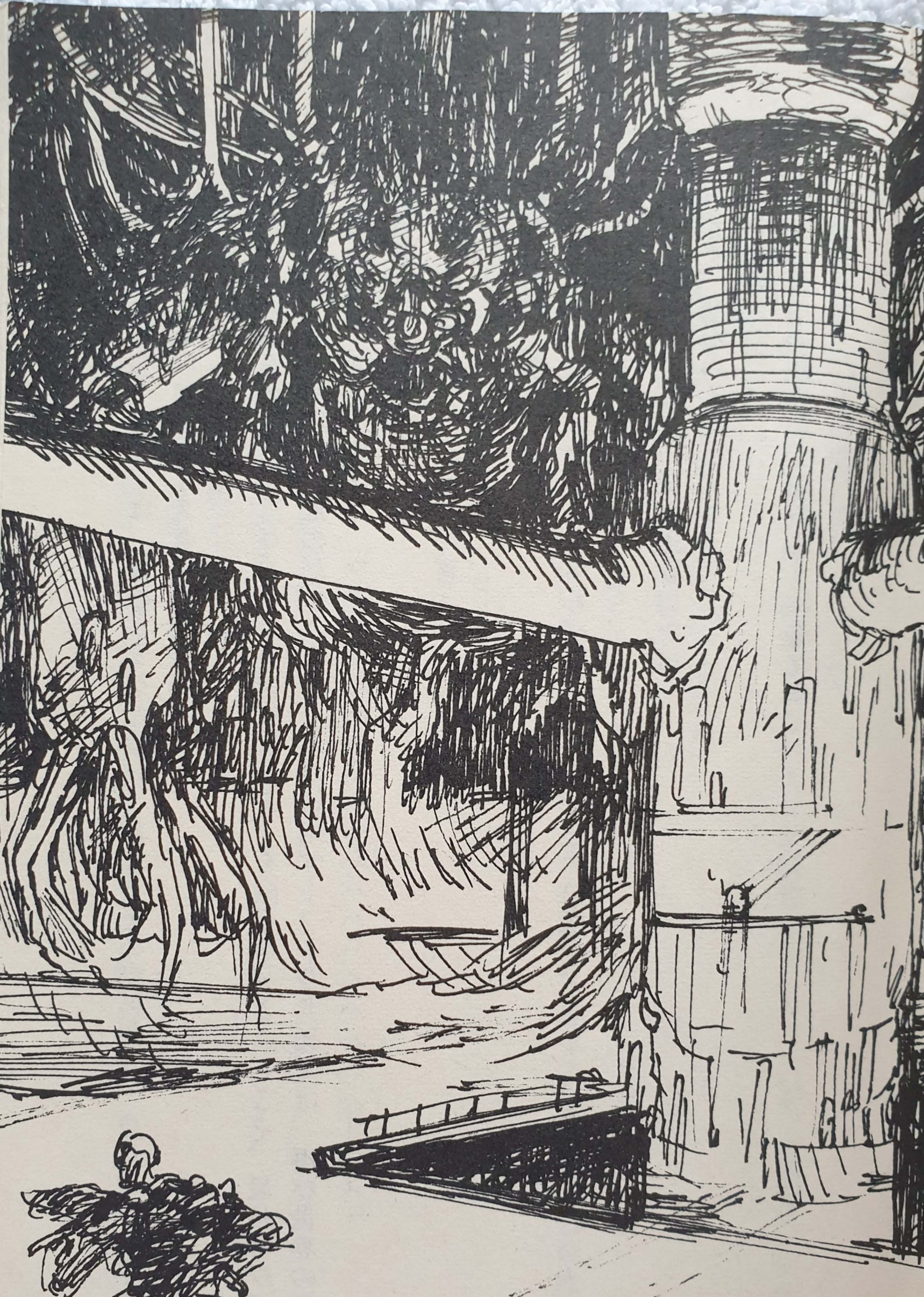
Lloyd’ s eyes widened.

The lion’ s mouth opened even wider, baring its fangs.

″That's right, Lloyd. I will never die. After my battle with you, I was reborn as an S-type device that connects my brain to Van Tour—″

″W-What...

″This is the true answer. Fusing the pilot and the computer—that was the way to create the ultimate Van Tour. With this, my homeland, the Republic of Zaftora, can once again become the world’ s dominant power. Hahahahahahaha. Hah. Ahah. Hahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!″ ■ “Ridiculous.” “Ah, Lloyd, you’ re spitting,” he said. “What did you say?” The lion’ s eyes glowed a crimson-black. · ‘二 ‘’ 二二：二二： “—



^^ “Everything that’ s happened on this island is ridiculous. The symbol of that is Driscoll. That’ s what you’ ve become.” ..^^^^- A crimson orb of light burst forth from the lion’ s eyes° 卒” “Two

“Lloyd, watch out!”

· Yan shouted. .:11-1 ― ― The iron pillar in front of Lloyd melted like candy. ; He threw himself to the ground and managed to dodge it.

But Lloyd didn’ t stop speaking.

″Countless people have been sacrificed for this nonsense. What is a ′homeland′? What is the Zaft Republic?″

“Shut up. I won’ t tolerate you insulting my homeland.”

Lloyd sat up.

He walked toward the lion. Staring into its eyes,

“I can’ t let you live. Right now, all I can think about is killing you,” he muttered.

“Interesting. Let’ s see what you’ ve got, Lloyd H.” M

″Captain, it′s dangerous!″

″It′s dangerous! Get back!″ ·’

″Get back, Lloyd. Please!″: Ni: But Lloyd didn′t stop.

calmly, yet with unyielding resolve, he closed in on the enemy before him. ◆ His eyes burned even more fiercely than a lion’ s crimson gaze. 1 “Karen. I’ m going to take this guy down.

For you. For myself. To bring this ridiculous battle to an end.

I will bring everything to a proper conclusion with these hands.″

Watch over me, Karen.

Karen, Karen, Karen H

″Karen, Karen, Karen, Karen, Karen^^!″

Lloyd screamed.

"Captain, I won' t let you go alone. I' ll avenge my father and older brother with my own hands."

Sakata sat up.

″JJ, let's fight together until the very end.″ ..;:—; ·',' Keith scooped up JJ and followed behind.

″This is the path I believe in. That' s why I won' t run away.″

Natalie I began to walk. .2:';—″ 15 ..

"Since I came to this island, Lloyd… since I met you guys, I feel like I' ve been taught what it means to be truly human. I feel like you taught me the true meaning of loving people." Frederick stood up. ■—《」 「「・ 》 "In the end, it' s humans who operate computers and weapons, isn' t it? It' s the passion of the human heart. I learned that too. From meeting you guys."

Hans took a step forward.

"I' m not a kid anymore. I didn' t become a deserter out of fear. I was afraid of dying in vain, but I, too… I, too…"

As if to shake off his hesitation, Eihin stood up and began to walk.

"Eihin, I won' t let you go alone. None of us are going to let you leave without me." ■ Yan walked on, a smile even appearing in his eyes:·. "It seems what I risked my life to do wasn' t a mistake. I can hold my head high and tell the comrades who went before me."

Gentsu strides forward. 1 Ni◆-cho.-: Ni...

"If I' m with everyone, if we' re all together, I' m not

afraid. After all, I, too—I, too—have learned so, so much from everyone about what’s truly important.”

Pewee moves forward.

Even if his legs tremble, he won’t run away. Even if his lips tremble and his eyes tremble, he won’t cry.

“Hahaha. You fools. This saves me a lot of trouble. I’ll torture each and every one of you to death. As sacrifices for the restoration of our homeland, the Republic of Zaftora.”

″Hold on!″

A voice rang out, ^^oe r

“I can’t leave this to a mere upstart.”

This is Alder, the veteran warrior who fought Lloyd in the arena back when Lloyd was in his wild days. “The gods are watching over us. Come on, let’s be brave.” This is Paul, the priest who was working to rescue the citizens in the town of Greylock. .,◆■· “I’m going to follow the man who beat me for the first time.” This is Gregorio Maias—known as Kong—who nearly killed Keith and was defeated by Lloyd. ″Lloyd, I'm fighting alongside you. To protect the nature of this island.″ It's Porunga.

“It’s not like me, but I’ve been swept up by Porunga’s passion.”

It was Bobby.″ - ″Y-you lot. Who are you? Why are you!?″

A wave of unease swept through the group at Driscoll’s voice. Then, Paul spoke up. ■Heart.'″:—; ◆> “We met at the harbor. We were all having the same dream.”

“The same dream!?”

“It was a dream about a blonde Caucasian woman. In the dream, she said, ‘Help Lloyd. Unite your hearts and fight together. If everyone’s hearts are in sync, you’re sure to win.’” ″

“It’ s Karen. Karen is the one who called everyone together!” Pivi shouted.

“N-nonsense. This charade is over!”

A beam of red light shot from the lion’ s eyes. It struck Lloyd head-on, but he didn’ t flinch. On the contrary, the beam seemed to scatter wildly, as if it had been intimidated by Lloyd’ s sheer willpower.

Lloyd was completely unharmed.

“W-what on earth is going on?”

He fired another barrage of heat rays.

But just like light hitting a mirror, they bounced right back.

″S-sorry. In my dream, that woman said one more thing.″ Paul said, as if remembering,

“ ‘The time has come to use the power of the third eye for Lloyd’ …” “Karen ”

The words Karen had spoken before her death came vividly to Lloyd’ s mind. ^■ 〃After all, I can only use my psychic powers three times.

I’ ll use the third one for you.

I’ ll save it for when you’ re really in trouble 〃

“Karen is alive. She’ s here, right now. And she’ s fighting alongside us.” Strength surged through Lloyd’ s body.

“Don’ t be ridiculous!”

Driscoll shouted.

Toward Sakata, toward Natari, toward Kiss, toward Frederick... A crimson beam of heat flies...;<11de1

But, just like Lloyd, the rays bounce off him without

piercing his body

"W-what on earth is going on?"

"I treated humans the same as machines. You lost," Lloyd said.

"W-What? ″

"Unlike machines, humans have a 'heart.' They have a 'soul.' Even now, Karen's heart and soul are fighting alongside us inside me."

"N-nonsense!"

"Try shooting me again."

Lloyd stood tall and closed his eyes.

—I won't let Karen fight alone. With my "heart" and "soul," I'll destroy Driscoll's brain. Yes, I'll focus all my will on that.

"All right, as you wish…!"

A heat ray flew from the lion's eyes toward the center of Lloyd's body. ;," , "Mouth;

"Gaaaaaah "

The scream was Driscoll's.

The heat ray had bounced off the front and struck the lion's forehead. ″ ■ Lloyd's eyes widened in shock.

″Put your 'heart' into it. Put your 'soul' into it and fire at Driscoll.″

″Got it!″

″Leave it to me!″

"Oh, Jesus."

Everyone put their heart into it. Put their soul into it.

And, aiming for the lion's forehead 0 .Fire^^. : ■

"Gaaaaaaah-! Grrrrrrr Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

·· A scream0 that shakes the surroundings. "■♦.━-.^" An electric discharge courses through the lion' s body. Flames rise. Sparks fly. "厂-1" And then. A burst—. 1111:· The giant lion crumbles to pieces, as if it had rotted away.

"W-We won." 亠 111 1 "We defeated the monster": - "Kiyatsu Hori" · Cheers erupt, centered around Lloyd. T Two The cheers are drowned out by an eerie laugh. -; ■ "Do you think you've won?" 1: Ni'; - A distorted voice echoes from the computer lying on the floor."I: ■ "You are nothing but tiny 'cogs' in the vast wheel of history. What you have done has no impact whatsoever on the world."..专.

Lloyd forcefully refuted those words. -;-: ;ゝ二— 「—.丿
"No, humans are not 'pions.' They are 'cogs' : : .二 : '. . Each and every one of us 'cogs' interlock with one another, and we turn the 'cogs' of the next era.

don' t turn, the 'cogs' of the next era will never turn.

Here on Huffman Island, we turned the 'cog' of time and put an end to that mad 'nightmare'."

"Can a 'nightmare' ever truly end? It will surely begin again somewhere else. Can you erase all of that? Lloyd "

"The next 'nightmare' will be erased by the next 'cog.' I' m only erasing the 'nightmare' right in front of me." Lloyd aimed his Tweige rifle at the computer.

He pulled the trigger.

The computer was blown to pieces with a single shot. ;>

Gel-like matter spurted from the interior, emitting a faint stench of decay.

# Chapter 37

“It’ s over, JJ. Don’ t worry, I’ ll take full responsibility for delivering the money you risked your life to earn to your family in Africa.”

Keith said.

“Your family in Africa?”

Frederick asked.

“He was the eldest of twelve siblings. His father’ s dead, and his mother’ s sick. His younger brothers and sisters are still living in abject poverty…”

“And,

“That was his catchphrase. ‘Once I get the money I need, I’ m going back to my family in Africa. I’ m not like you. I can’ t kill people for money I don’ t need,’ he’ d say.”

″Whoops, sorry, JJ. I guess that was supposed to be our little secret.″ Keith apologized to the body he was carrying.

“Captain, I think I’ m going to leave this island. I’ m taking my dad and my older brother back to our hometown ” Sakata muttered.

“I’ m worried about my father, who parted ways with us at Lupidis. His actions will surely be treated as treason ”

Natalie said.

Gents spoke up. ;. Ni -

“I’ m going to make this island a place where people can truly live. My fight isn’ t over yet.”

He said to Lloyd,

“What do you say? Shall we do this together?” ·

″･ゝ^^(

After a moment of silence, as if deep in thought.

Lloyd muttered.

″Everything comes after we bring this to a close.″

After glancing at the collapsed lion statue and Driscoll’ s scattered computer.

Lloyd issued his order.

“Blow this place up. Everyone, hurry to the helicopter!”

″Meldivsky, Secretary-General of the International Peacekeeping Organization, stated that the explosion that occurred early this morning off the coast of Long Rivers Island—located approximately 50 kilometers from Fort Monas City on Huffman Island—was carried out by the terrorist organization ''Souls of Huffman,' had carried out a mass suicide on Long River Island, which they had secretly used as their base, and declared that this had resolved all issues on Huffman Island.

From the New York Days 〉

# Chapter 38

It has been six months since he returned from Huffman Island. —*''¥r =' ■Frederick was sitting at his computer in his room.-;;; The certificate for the World Journalism Award he had recently won was displayed on the wall. It was an award he received for an article he published as a war correspondent, revealing the truth behind the explosion on Long Rivers Island and the Second Huffman Conflict. This article sparked an international outcry, and movements to uncover the truth flourished around the world.

■ Amid mounting international criticism, both OCU and the USN acknowledged that some of the reported content was, in fact, true.

■Immediately after the article was published, Mr. Merdivsky resigned as Secretary-General of the International Peacekeeping Organization. ″However, the Republic of Zaftora continued to vehemently deny the contents of the article. ■1: ■Furthermore, since the article was published, it was a fact that *The Tokyo Times* had been subjected to various forms of pressure—both overt and covert—though the identity of those responsible remains unknown. 1'. .

Partly because of this, Frederick was currently on an extended leave of absence.

There were two purposes for this leave. ♦ One was to compile his experiences on Huffman Island into a book. The manuscript he was currently typing into the Pancon was for that very book.

He had decided on the title: *The Island of Homelands*.

The dedication at the beginning starts with the following passage: ■■'' 〃I dedicate this book to Captain Lloyd Clive

and the crew of the ″Canyon Crow,″ as well as to my late dear friend Park Il. -l

This true story was born from their intense anger and deep sorrow. Some of them have now begun working to make the entire island of Huffman an independent nation free of borders and ethnic discrimination.

I continue to pray that their wishes will reach the hearts of people all over the world.;

Frederick Lancaster-〃 However, the manuscript has not progressed beyond that point. Be ‘■ni. When I close my eyes, the events on Huffman Island come vividly to mind.

I was in the midst of pondering where to begin unraveling those intricate experiences and weaving them into the threads of a book.

“Daddy!” ■ ■ ■

The door opened, and Naomi rushed in.

Before I left, I used to lock the door and keep the room off-limits. “But now, it’ s different. The door is left unlocked. I’ m in a ‘welcome all’ mode.

After all, this isn’ t a workplace.

It’ s a home where I live with my precious family.

“So, how’ s work going?” - J■■■ ■. Naomi interrupted.

“I’ m having a hard time getting it together. I’ m stuck.” I tell my young daughter the truth about my work. This, too, would have been unthinkable before we went to Huffman Island.

“When you feel that way, it’ s good to go for a walk to clear your head.”

“That’ s a good idea . Would you like to join me?”

ー、^″^ >z^ ^-･」

Naomi broke into a beaming smile.

Holding hands, they left the room.

″Teru″

Naomi ran toward the front door.

“No, you can’ t go out onto the street.”

″Hmph. I'm just playing in the garden with Yuto...″

Frederick went into the living room. He took his jacket off the hanger and put it on. “Oh, are you going out?”

Sayuri pokes her head out from the kitchen.

″Yeah. I'm going for a walk with Naomi.″

″Oh, okay. I'm baking cookies right now. Let's all have tea together when you get back.″ Sayuri smiled.

Frederick smiled back and approached Sayuri.

″Thank you,″

He said, and gave her a light kiss on the lips.

″You, you...″

Sayuri’ s cheeks flushed, and she smiled sweetly.

A little bird chirped outside the window. 2-story building

“Oh, I wonder what that is?”

“That’ s unusual—it’ s a lark.”

″A lark...?″ ″One...″ –’ ; ;■’ ″If there's anything you want, I can go buy it for you.″ ″No, it's okay. I'll be away starting the day after tomorrow anyway.″

″I see.″

We’ re leaving for the Maldives the day after tomorrow. Uni Ni: –:, the three of us—mother and children. We plan to relax

and spend our time gazing at the ocean. :L r ■ The plan is for a week, but if we feel like it, we might stay longer.

"Hapa, hurry up!" Naomi's voice calls out from the garden.

"Well, I'm off then."

Frederick turned his back.

"You—"

Suri called out to him. >2-1;″—

"What is it?"

Frederick turned back around.

"No, nothing. Be careful." Suri smiled gently.

A smile that soothed him from the bottom of his heart. !-;

It was a smile she would never have given Frédéric a year ago. Frédéric smiled back.

A smile that could rival Sayuri's. A smile he could never have managed back when he considered work his top priority. This smile was the second—and greatest—reason he'd taken this vacation.

# Epilogue

· A mountain road. – – 1 Two Vantours are lying in wait beside some bushes. A military truck comes racing through the mountain pass. – , ■ “Just as the intel said,” one of them said.

· “Is there a nuclear weapon in that transport?” –the other one asks. *1Ni’ , “That’ s right. No matter what, it looks like they’ re intent on plundering this island.” “All right, let’ s go!”

The two Vantours sprinted forward. “General, they’ re here! Terrorists!” The PMO soldier driving the truck shouted toward the back seat.

“They’ ve shown up. Without even realizing it was information we leaked. All right, activate the Vantzers!” ■From inside the truck... · A combat Vantzer belonging to the PMO–the Peacekeeping Mediation Organization–leapt out.

・Their number exceeded twenty in total ·

“Damn it! It’ s not a nuclear weapon!”

A battered Vantzer, clad entirely in black, shouted. 1za .: : ..:

“Looks like we’ ve been set up.” Another unit raised an old Tweige rifle.

“There are only two enemy units. Take them out all at once!” 1: ’1 The voice of the PMO general rallying his troops echoed.

″We′re in trouble, Lloyd,″

The black Vantour groaned.

“Calm down, Gents. Life and death are in the hands of fate.”

He said that, but the enemy was made up of soldiers armed with the latest weaponry. They were only two.

On top of that, after days of guerrilla warfare, both the Vantour and his body had reached the absolute limit of exhaustion.

*He closed his eyes and spoke to his Van Tour in his mind.

″It looks like this is the end. Karen 〃

A deafening roar. Vibrations---! — -1 Gentsu’ s voice, filled with surprise:

I haven't been attacked. ; De-, ,:-’;:.—・・

・Lloyd timidly opened his eyes 0 ..;:JB

A Vantourer wielding a hand rod is racing like the wind through the PMO Vantours. ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^——‘1.
“You’ re having fun, aren’ t you? No cutting in line.” ■
“Keith!”

From the mountaintop, a blue Vantour fired the latest missile launcher, the “Donkey DX2.” With a single shot, it shattered the PMO attacker:. H “Sakata!”

“Captain, I’ ve realized something. I can’ t just turn my back on this island and live my life. Not for the sake of my father and older brother who died. And not for my own sake either.”

The Van Tour was dyed crimson. The Catsray in his hand spewed fire.

″Lloyd. The problems of this island are too heavy for you to bear alone.″ zt ■

1. Even you:

“Whoa, Lloyd. It’ s too soon to get all emotional!”

“Yan!” -

″I talked to my sister. She said we can′t just be happy on our own. Plus, I can′t stand seeing guys like the old me get taken advantage of.″—Yi-Hing fires his machine gun in rapid succession. With a newfound toughness, he charges toward the enemy. ″Damn it. Call for reinforcements.″^^^^^^^^^^^^^^- A PMO officer shouts. ^^^^^^^^^:;

″I-I can′t. The radio isn′t working.″ ′-; : … ; Quail4 く.、挈 ″What?!″

″Heh heh heh. Too bad for you. I made sure the radios wouldn’ t work around here.″

“I can’ t stand watching this. Lloyd, information is everything in war.” HJ- —’-1.: Hans laughs. ^^^^^^ -;-w ; “It’ s not just information. We need supplies too, don’ t we~!” A large supply truck races toward them, kicking up dust. ″ ; - — - “Pi, Piwiri”

“I’ ve brought in a whole load of the latest weapons. And food, of course!” Pwee said happily.

″Oh, come on. I’ ve made plenty of money. I thought it might be fun to entrust the rest of my life to you guys. I’ m sure JJ would say the same thing.″

Keith dances. — -:

“For the sake of those who died on this island.”

Sakata fired: 1;: — “J-Ni Doni,” “And for those who will live on this island ”

Eihin fights.

″Yahooz. It′s the Canyon Crow reunion, isn′t it!″

″Pewee!″ Lloyd shouted. ″Lloyd, Captain. What's the next move?″ Natalie looked to him for instructions. Lloyd closed his eyes.

″Karen. Wait a little longer. I still have things I need to do ″ ″No, I'm coming too. With you, and all of you!″

・I felt as if I heard Karen' s voice from somewhere.'': '.

"Karen !"

・I opened my eyes wide. ■

Her eyes were burning with intensity 0. :

Lloyd shouted into the radio with all his might 0
'..-..,;';-

"Canyon Crow. All units advance 2;;-: " ' ■

-■■.- ″Front Mission: Frontline Report″ End





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# Vampire MIDNIGHT FLYER

Rei Isaki Illustrations by Kyoko Tsuchiya

The Dark Stalkers' fierce battle begins now!! The Arnsland family was on the verge of annihilation at the hands of Zabel and Bishamon, sent by Ozom. The head of the family, Waynes, stood up to them alongside his butler, but was sealed inside a plasma sphere by the power unleashed by Noiron. Waynes' daughter, Morrigan, sets out on a journey of battle to save her father.

Shin Megami Tensei if・U

No. 7: Chariot Illustration by Kazuma Kaneko

People [Wooden Horus Upper (Atlus)

The wildly popular RPG is now a complete novelization! With a sudden, violent shock, the private Karukozaka High School was transported to another world. Second-year students Jin and Yumi desperately search for a way out. Following first-year student Reiko's words, "Go to the gymnasium to solve the mystery," the two head there and witness a gigantic phantom floating above a sinister magic circle.

# Wizai J: The Bloodline of the Mad King

## Written by Ippei Noma

[Illustrations by Sachiko Kamimura, Co-written by Kenji Fushimi

The beginning of the grand ADWIZ saga!! On a dark night when not even starlight reached the ground, let alone moonlight, the warrior maiden Duka encountered a boy named Flin, who had fallen from the void shrouded in phosphorescent light. Flin, the prince of Einsstadt, had been cast out by his father, King Anshurak, to the nameless town of Vankur without his knowledge!

Provisional Shrine Maiden Toko 2

The Betrayal of Genbu-in

Original Concept and Illustrations by Jun Minamiwara, Written by Kudo Sanae

## Have you abandoned your heart, Genbuin?! That is betrayal!

Genbuin, a spiritual warrior whose prowess is unmatched even within the Temple of Exorcism, has married a yokai!? Her partner is the demonic yokai, Torihisha. The marriage ceremony begins in the mysterious colosseum of Agun Village, where yokai from all over Japan gather. What is the terrifying ambition of the yokai hidden behind the scenes? Do Tomoko and the others stand a chance against their senior apprentice, Genbuin!?

Is it wrong to have fun?!

Written by Isao Hiura, Illustrated by Yutaka Yoneda

## The Daily Life of a Slacker Writer!?

His manuscripts are always late. Isao Hiura, who considers himself Japan's number one slacker writer precisely because he doesn't write, chronicles his unvarnished daily life with miraculous perseverance in this diary spanning three full years, starting from the very first issue of Kuchigout. Why can't he write his manuscripts? The "key" to unlocking that secret lies within this book. A must-have for fans of the Gi-Yokai and Hiura enthusiasts alike